MORTAL ASSEMBLAGES: RHETORICS OF ECOLOGY AND DEATH

by

Joshua Trey Barnett

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Communication

The University of Utah

May 2017

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of **Joshua Trey Barnett**

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Kevin Michael DeLuca	, Chair	**Feb. 6, 2017** Date Approved
Danielle Endres	, Member	**Feb. 6, 2017** Date Approved
Robin Jensen	, Member	**Feb. 6, 2017** Date Approved
Helene Shugart	, Member	**Feb. 6, 2017** Date Approved
Robert Stephen Tatum	, Member	**Feb. 6, 2017** Date Approved

and by **Kent Ono** , Chair of

the Department of **Communication**

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

We cannot take for granted that when we speak of "the human" we speak of something unchanging, unquestionable, ontologically durable. On the contrary, what it means to be the kinds of beings that we are is always fluctuating in response to forces beyond our control. Historically, deathcare practices have forcefully impinged upon how we think of ourselves. For more than 150 years in the United States, conventional burial and cremation have been working to materialize Enlightenment ideas of humans as discrete, autonomous, and self-contained beings, thus estranging us from our very conditions of (im)possibility. In *Mortal Assemblages*, I argue that contemporary shifts in the rhetoric and practice of deathcare are transforming how some groups think about what it means to be human. Tracking several emergent ruptures to this predominant way of thinking, I demonstrate how long held ideals of the human are giving way to more ecological understandings. The cases that animate this project variously disperse, decompose, and digest classical concepts of human subjectivity in favor of thinking the human as finite gatherings of material-symbolic forces. Marshaling resources from the fields of rhetoric, history, continental philosophy, social theory, and ecology, I extrapolate from texts circulating in and around the practices of conservation burial, human composting, and consumptive reciprocity to create concepts that might help us better respond to the fact that we are fundamentally, collectively, and inescapably entangled in complex ecosystems.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

... the acknowledgements, where a book is dedicated,
offered, rendered up to those who, known or unknown, have
already given it to you in advance ...

— Jacques Derrida

This text, like all texts, is an accumulation of fragments which hold together under the sign of a signatory. It bears a title, *Mortal Assemblages: Rhetorics of Ecology and Death*, and the name of an author. It would be easy, all too easy, to treat this text as if it were the culmination of thoughts that inhabit the person, the subject, to which this signature points. No doubt, the word "I" even appears throughout the pages that follow as a shorthand for the complex relational forces which give rise to the signatory as such, to the author himself. The "I," of course, is a lie, an illusion, an overused figure of common parlance. It enables us to ignore the complicated networks that must be in place for an "I" to think, much less write, in the first place. The "I" is always already a placeholder for something much more interesting, enduring, historical, social. It is the condensation point for a dense layering of fragments which one inherits without choice. The "I" covers over, it veils, the more rigorous work of tracing the networks of inheritance that compose the author. Hence, by convention we "acknowledge" at the beginning or ending of works those others who have impacted our capacity to think and to write, and so to sign, the text itself, without ever discarding the "I."

It is theoretically much stronger, for reasons that will become apparent in the unraveling of this text, to treat the signatory as a writing assemblage, that is, as a gathering of heterogeneous material-symbolic forces that contingently compose it as a writer. In this sense, the "I" is always already a "we" or an "us," a collection of human and more-than-human forces which hold together for a shorter or longer while and that is inscribed, indefinitely, on the title page of a work. It is the surviving vestige of these relations, an attestation to certain comings-together. In the making of a dissertation, many forces come together to capacitate the author in particular ways. There are the obvious persons—supervisors, committee members, department chairs, directors of graduate studies, professors, classmates, students, administrators of all kinds, and colleagues outside one's organizational home—who directly impact the writing of such a work. Somewhat less directly, partners, friends, family members, casual acquaintances, and companion species indelibly leave their mark as well. Then there are the funding mechanisms, technological apparatuses, writing machines, reams of paper, special pens, physical spaces, chairs, couches, institutions, and other ephemeral resources that are, if not required, certainly quite helpful. A gambit of chemicals are often involved (coffee, tea, soda, water, wine, and vodka key among them), as are more or less healthy foodstuffs. This writing assemblage requires fuel after all. Time plays a chief role in the writing assemblage, too. Time is the gift which this assemblage needs most—time to read, to think, to walk, to write and rewrite, to sleep, to retreat, to eat, to share, and to re-write again and again. In short, the "I" is an assemblage of forces which make it possible to write, an ecology of things that gather together to generate the conditions of possibility for authorship, for compositions of other kinds.

An acknowledgements section is a way of retrospectively accounting for the gifts which have made the composition of a text thinkable and doable. It is, Derrida writes in *Cinders*, "where a book is dedicated, offered, rendered up to those who, known or unknown, have already given it to you in advance." To acknowledge is to recognize publicly the forces which have mattered most, as well as to demonstrate the extent to which one's capacities as a writing assemblage hang on the delicate, contingent dance of multitudes of others, human and more-than-human alike. Because the writing assemblage which composes its "acknowledgements" cannot itself be privy to every force that has made its work possible, every attempt at recognition is thwarted from the outset. Precisely because the "I" has never been an "I" in the classical sense, it cannot make total sense of itself nor of the complex relations which make it possible. Nevertheless, it is a task well worth pursuing.

No single person has given me as much to think about as Kevin DeLuca. Before deciding to move to Salt Lake City to pursue my doctorate, I visited the University of Utah to meet with faculty and graduate students, and to get a sense of whether this place and program were right for me. After two days of whirlwind meetings, parties, and tours, I was to meet Kevin on my final morning in town. He arrived at my hotel a few minutes late wearing hiking boots, black cargo pants, and a T-shirt. He asked if I wanted to go for a hike and, although I didn't bring the right shoes or clothes for that kind of thing, I said sure. We drove to the top of one of the foothills that surrounds the northern edge of the city and began winding our way up a well-worn path bordered by the native sagebrush that covers the western United States. More ambitious hikers and bikers rushed past us as we moseyed around deep in dialogue about environmental politics, higher education, and

shared histories in Athens, Georgia. Every hundred yards or so, we stopped to take a breath and take in views of the valley. Kevin gave me the lay of the land. All we could see to the north were the ridges, sloping softly upward, which we were soon to mount. Looking west, we saw the university perched on a hill. To the south, we glimpsed Mount Olympus and other snowcapped mountains. Way south, too far to see, Kevin said, were magnificent deserts, beautiful and brutal at the same time, and well worth visiting. Looking to the east, two things caught our attention: the Great Salt Lake, shining in the sunlight, and the Kennecott Copper Mine, proudly touted by some as the deepest man-made hole anywhere on Earth. Spread before us, the valley revealed the beautiful, necessary, violent union of nature and culture.

By the time we made it down the mountain and back to the car, I knew that I was going to move to Salt Lake City and that I was going to write my dissertation somewhere in the valley we had just surveyed. What I did not yet know is that Kevin would exert such force on my thinking. He convinced me to read and appreciate philosophers I had been convinced to avoid—Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze key among them. He gave me permission to challenge traditions I had been trained by others to accept, to take my intellectual work seriously, and to pursue above all the life of the mind. He engenders the idea that something in the world forces us to think by incessantly inciting and provoking both in and out of the seminar room. Never content with common sense, he showed me how to think against the grain and to theorize without succumbing to comfortable forms of reactionary moralism. He told me when my work was good and interesting, but, more importantly, he told me when it was imprecise and wanting. He worked hard to ensure that I had the time and the space and the money to engage the life

of the mind in a sustained way. For these and other reasons, I am grateful to Kevin for giving me, again and again, opportunities to think the world anew.

In addition to Kevin's provocative influence, my committee members—Danielle Endres, Robin Jensen, Helene Shugart, and Stephen Tatum—have made an especially strong impression on my thinking and writing. Little do they know, I have been referring to them as the "dream team" behind their backs, and they have consistently earned this appellation by reading my work, commenting on drafts of various writing projects, chatting about hang-ups with theory, and, in general, being kind people to whom I could turn in good times and bad. Stephen turned me on to the joys of eco-critical thinking and reminded me of the pleasures of relationality. Helene pushed me to clarify my thinking, and she was a source of much fodder in the preparation of certain portions of this dissertation, especially Chapter Five. Robin engaged my ideas on their own terms and showed me ways that I might contribute to the rhetorical tradition. And Danielle provided immense intellectual support over the years: we have worked together on all sorts of scholarly projects, and I am better for our encounters and interactions. Like Robin, Danielle helped me to understand—and to embrace—the ways in which my work not only ruptures but also supplements the discipline of rhetoric. Above all, my committee members have collectively made this process entirely enjoyable. I could not have done this without *them*. Nor would I have wanted to.

Colleagues near and far have provided support, encouragement, and occasions for thinking about the issues which occupy me throughout this dissertation. Leland Spencer has been a singularly important intellectual companion since we met in 2010, when he first arrived at the University of Georgia to pursue his own doctoral work on the rhetoric

of women religious leaders. Leland has read more of my crappy first drafts than perhaps anyone else and yet is somehow still endlessly willing to help me think about rhetoric and social change. Jamie Landau, too, has been an abiding source of intellectual and professional support. Besides encouraging me to follow my heart and attend graduate school, Jamie has provided important and wise advice to me too many times to calculate here. Corey Johnson was the first person to show me how to pursue a life in academia, and he continues to demonstrate for me the pleasures of combining intellectual labor with leisure. Brandon Hill has given me the joy of thinking across disciplines, methods, and theories, not to mention a friendship fortified by champagne-soaked conversations. Chuck Morris has, for half a decade, made time every year to chat with me, usually over a glass of good wine, queer rhetorician to queer rhetorician, about the joys and struggles of pursuing transgressive thoughts. To these five, all my gratitude.

Yet others have impinged upon me in significant ways, which I want to recognize here in an inescapably partial accounting of my intellectual and professional debts. Mary Alice Adams, Michelle Ballif, Mariam Betlemidze, Brenda Bowen, Robb Bruce, Betsy Brunner, Julia Corbett, Kathleen de Onís, Jake Dionne, Tom Dunn, Michaela Frischherz, Beth Kaszynski Gilmore, Daniel Grinberg, Yancey Gulley, Blake Hallinan, Kelly Happe, Marouf Hasian, Joe Hatfield, Ammar Hussein, Robert Ivie, Eric Jenkins, Casey Kelly, Brian Kumm-Schaley, Sean Lawson, Susan Lepselter, Katie Lind, John Lynch, José Ángel Maldonado, Maureen Mathieson, Megan McFarlane, Marek Muller, Norma Musih, Kent Ono, Nicholas Paliewicz, Phaedra Pezzullo, Brian Ray, Donald Rubin, Julie Madrone Schutten, Steve Schwarze, Natasha Seegert, Jon Simons, Mary Strine, Ye Sun, Robert Terrill, Anjali Vats, Kirstin Wagner, and Janet Walker, among others I have no

doubt failed to mention here, have given me so much. Some have read drafts of this and other works, providing insightful commentary that has enriched my thinking. Many have played a role in my intellectual development over the years as teachers and mentors. All have shown me extraordinary compassion, care, and kindness within the academy in ways which feel increasingly rare.

Others have directly supported my work on this project. Audiences at the National Communication Association, Western States Communication Association, the University of Nebraska Lincoln, and the University of Minnesota Duluth have responded generously to various portions of this dissertation project. Several students in my Communication and Social Responsibility seminar at the University of Utah—especially Christine Brady, Connor Richards, and Aly Schwermer—have inspired me to think, write, and teach in more provocative ways. At the University of Utah, I have been fortunate to receive yearlong fellowships from both the Global Change and Sustainability Center and the College of Humanities, which have enabled me to spend immense amounts of time with my nose in books and in cafes writing. The chair of the Department of Communication, Kent Ono, has been an abiding source of material and emotional support. In her role as director of graduate studies, Helene Shugart has given me the gift of mentorship and guidance. And our departmental administrators—Amity Mower, Stephanie Krussell, Jennifer Duignan, and Jessica Tanner—have made my endeavors uncomplicated.

My family deserves all the praise I can foist upon them. My parents, Tammy and Trey Barnett, have been an enduring source of psychological, material, and social support not only during my graduate studies but throughout my life. By their own example, they have demonstrated for me the value of hard work and integrity. Over the years, they have

celebrated my successes, condemned my bad behavior, and encouraged me to work harder and go farther than I might otherwise have gone. They have loved me in ways that only the best of parents can. I am eternally grateful to them. While writing this dissertation, my family confronted ruptures unlike any others we had experienced before. One of those ruptures was the materialization of mortality in the form of the loss of a beloved family member. On November 4, 2016, my paternal grandmother, Mary Lou Sanders Barnett, died at her home in Nicholson, Georgia. "Granna," as she was affectionately known, taught me the ways of unconditional acceptance and love, of a hospitality without questions. During those trying times, my sister, Malorie Hughes, and I grew closer over the course of countless phone calls that stretched late into the night, and I am appreciative of her listening ear and mature wisdom. Her children, James Douglas and Nora Kate, provided the pleasures of cuteness and youth from afar. They make me glad to be an uncle and hopeful for the future.

I am endlessly thankful as well to my closest friends who, though often separated by distance and time, have given me ample opportunities to let my hair down in the midst of all this earnest intellectual labor. Jasmine Morrissette was the first person I met as an undergraduate at the University of Georgia. She helped me realize who I was at 18 years old and has been a fiercely loyal friend since the day we met. Since 2010, Meg Graham has been a friend and a confidante, not to mention a near-daily (tele)presence in my life. Many of my most cherished friends have come in pairs, and I am grateful for it. Corey Johnson and Yancey Gulley took me in when I was an up-and-coming academic and queer activist in Athens, Georgia. They helped me realize what my life could be. Brandon Hill and Erick Amick queered my life in Indiana in all the best ways, and they continue to

make Chicago one of my favorite weekend destinations. And the companionship of Spencer Turner and Clint Urvand has deeply enriched my years in Salt Lake City. Now that they live in the Capital City, they are turning out to be excellent travel mates as well. Jasmine, Meg, Corey, Yancey, Brandon, Erick, Spencer, and Clint—thank you for being a friend.

Finally, I am sustained at home by two lively companions—one human, one feline. My love, Brandon Killen, is the smartest, kindest, funniest, strangest person I know. He is "my" strange stranger. Not only is Brandon my mate in the mundaneness of everyday life, but he is also a source of constant intellectual stimulation. He thinks about every question, event, and challenge in ways that inevitably give me something new to ponder. He pushes me to see the world differently. I am a better person and scholar because of his presence and influence. Brandon also makes me good food, walks with me on difficult paths, travels about with me, and helps me imagine my future. I am so happy that he entered into and transformed my assemblage. And Judith, my dissertation kitty, our feline friend and foe, keeps me always alert and reminds me daily the joys of play and response. Her early morning snuggles and mid-day feistiness have furnished welcome distractions throughout otherwise routine days spent worshipping books and computer screens. Wherever I am, I yearn to be home with these two.

CHAPTER ONE

MORTAL ASSEMBLAGES

Can this text become the margin of a margin? Where has the body of the text gone when the margin is no longer a secondary virginity but an inexhaustible reserve ... ?

— Jacques Derrida (1982, xxiii), *Margins of Philosophy*

Situated somewhere on the margin of a margin, this dissertation is a response to two mortally significant questions: First, what does it mean to be a human becoming, an assemblage, instead of a human being? And, second, how are emergent rhetorical practices associated with deathcare impacting upon the form and figure of human beings? These two questions summon responses that take seriously the fact that finitude entails exposure and that it is exposure, rather than enclosure, that makes us the kinds of beings that we fundamentally are. Moreover, it is these conditions of finitude and exposure which connect us to other humans and the more-than-human world in relations of (rhetorical) response. I venture answers to these questions by tracing (de)compositions of several *mortal assemblages*—a phrase which articulates mortality, or finitude, together with assembly, understood as modes of gathering—at the beginning of the 21st century in the United States. By dwelling on mortality, I stray somewhat from the fashionable Foucaultian emphases on human vitality and livability, as well as on their biopolitical

management. Finitude directs attention not necessarily to what makes a human life more or less livable but, rather, to how death engenders certain forms of relationality and response-ability. Hence my concern with assemblages. Death occasions all sorts of gatherings that bear directly upon the kinds of assemblages which human beings become, and our relations with those gatherings suggest the kinds of creatures that we hope to become. This dissertation is a sustained endeavor to trace some of the mortal assemblages that are currently composing human beings in relation to the ecosystems in which we are always already entangled.

One of my key concerns throughout *Mortal Assemblages* is with the ontological status of the "human," a word whose etymology sheds some light on the challenges and opportunities that will appear again and again in the following chapters. The English word human is a distant relative, temporally anyway, to the Latin term *hūmānus*, which meant "of or belonging to people (as opposed either to animals or to divine beings)." This seemingly transparent sense of the term resurfaces again in the French word *humain*, meaning simply "human being." In both its Latin and French iterations, as well as its English form, the word human appears self-referential: it seems to refer to something obvious, something whole that need not be defined in terms of its parts. Where it is distinguished, it is against or apart from animal and divine others. Thus, the word human ostensibly points to a material entity which is itself recognizably human and therefore needs little explanation. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which includes three definitions of the word human in its noun form, divulges this roundabout sense of the human: the word human means variously "a human being, a person; a member of the species *Homo sapiens* or other (extinct) species of the genus *Homo*;" "that which is human or relates to

humanity;" and "the average or typical human being; humans collectively, the human race" ("Human, Adj. and N." 2016).

These definitions suggest at least two ontological interpretations: first, that the human has obvious, if not unquestioned, boundaries, and that to define it is in some sense to be redundant; and, second, that this apparent redundancy is associated with a more complex sense that the human is contingent, that it refers not to a stable entity but, rather, to a changing set of material-symbolic forces that we choose to call human at a given time and in a given place. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1999) teaches us, what counts as "the human" is an open question, one which receives its answer only in the shifting flows of rhetorical activity that mark out, for a time, the contours of this sort of being. And, as Nietzsche's heir Michel Foucault (1994, 387) contends, it is not even clear how long any version, any definition, of the human will last: "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." Throughout this dissertation, I contest the obviousness of the human by exploiting its incessant articulation to diverse practices, especially those rituals which are carried out on the corpses of the kinds of beings we choose to call "human beings." In other words, I repeatedly demonstrate how the human itself shifts in relation to the postmortem practices to which it is exposed.

In teasing out some of the ways in which the human is composed in different assemblages, this dissertation engages in a form of "play" that "tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (Derrida 1978, 292). I riff on the shifting form of the human by insisting on the word *assemblage* as an open but organizing "terministic screen," which reflects, deflects, and selects our attention in particular ways (Burke 1966). As I use it here, the term assemblage can be traced to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987, 4) *A*

Thousand Plateaus, where they conceptualize the assemblage as "a multiplicity" that is "a kind of organism, or signifying totality" that also takes part in "continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity." Moreover, as Manuel DeLanda (2016) points out, the notion of assemblages deployed by Deleuze and Guattari names both the process of gathering and the contingent products of those gatherings. Assemblage functions both as a noun and a verb. Assemblages are simultaneously and noncontradictorily singularities and multiplicities or, more precisely, *they are singularities because they are multiplicities*. Assemblages are specific gatherings of heterogeneous materials that contingently compose a singularity for a while. In *Vibrant Matter*, the political theorist Jane Bennett (2010, 23–24) offers a useful definition that strikes close to home for the work of this dissertation:

> Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that cofound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of a group.

What Bennett explicates, and what I want to highlight, is the extent to which assemblages are comings-together of strange, diverse materials, including discourse, that make things happen in the world. Assemblages are loaded with particular capacities to act and be acted upon by the emergent qualities imbued in the contingent collective by the arrayed elements. Assemblages are everywhere. Human beings are simultaneously assemblages

in their own right, since every body is in some significant sense a collective of several sorts of material interacting for a while, and they act as elements in other assemblages, including postmortem gatherings that produce different ecological futures.

While Deleuze and Guattari understood discourse as intricately important to the concept of assemblages, all too often attending to assemblages comes at the expense of engaging the impacts of rhetoric on the composition of such gatherings. Pushing back against this common oversight, my other central concern in *Mortal Assemblages* is with the rhetorical force that deathcare discourses exert on ecological assemblages of which the human is but one part. The field of deathcare comprises the various postmortem practices exercised on dead human bodies. For example, embalming, funerals, burials, and cremations are all forms of deathcare carried out by, among other actors, professional undertakers. Deathcare practices powerfully impact upon our sense of what it is to be a human being (Harris 2007; Laqueur 2015; Mitford 2000). Not only is the meaning of the word human open to emergent articulations, but so too are embodied humans subject to shifting ontologies of their very becoming (a word that I prefer to "being," which too easily connotes stability) through encounters with deathcare rituals.

Put simply, different rhetorical practices compose the human differently. This is a strong claim, which I develop in the central chapters of this dissertation by paying close attention to the rhetorical practices of three emergent, ecological discourses of deathcare. Plato's (2005) early writings on rhetoric, especially those in the *Phaedrus*, foreshadow this view of rhetoric as world-making. Whereas Plato's Socrates often turned a critique of rhetoric into an ethical lesson (Weaver 1985), I am more interested here in *understanding* how these deathcare discourses impact the form of the human. Rhetoric, as Kevin

DeLuca (1999a, 346) argues, is "ontological" and can be defined as "the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures." In this sense, rhetorics do not simply reflect or re-present social relations in more or less accurate terms (though certainly they do this, too). On the contrary, rhetorics compose, decompose, and recompose social relations in real time by linking certain elements (and not others) together and by authorizing or provoking particular ways of thinking and acting in the world. Rhetorics circulating in and around deathcare are particularly potent though often overlooked. As we will see, they deeply inform who and what we think we are, as well as how our bodies enter into various kinds of relations with the more-than-human world. The ontological status of the human is not simply given over as an *a priori* but is, rather, composed in the mundane rhetorical practices of everyday life and death.

Deathcare rhetorics forcefully impact relationships among humans and the more-than-human world. Such rhetorics not only set into motion certain expectations about whether and how human corpses will come into contact with elements like dirt, water, air, and other organisms, but they also shape and sustain material practices that literally compose the human body differently by creating distinctive assemblages. As the religious scholar Gary Laderman (2003, xvi) contends, the

> final ceremonies that accompany a corpse's disposal, as well as its preparation for these ceremonies and the manner in which it vanishes from living society, reveal a great deal about the animating cultural values and integrating social principles at work in any particular community.

Since the mid-1860s in the United States, dominant deathcare practices have sequestered human corpses from the more-than-human world. The popularization of embalming during the American Civil War gave rise to the multibillion dollar modern burial

industry, which is predicated on practices (deep burial) and products (heavy caskets and concrete vaults) that keep dead human bodies from mingling with the soil in which they are buried and organisms that could facilitate their decomposition (Plumwood 2008). Conventional burial, as this sequestration model of interment is often called by practitioners and academics alike, treats the human as a material entity apart from the more-than-human world, something privileged which ought to be protected from what is not human, a form worth preserving even at increasingly high consumer and ecological costs (e.g., Harker 2012; Rumble et al. 2014). While it requires fewer material resources than conventional burial, cremation consumes immense quantities of fuel and produces troubling amounts of emissions. Since its introduction in the United States in the mid-1870s, cremation has steadily become more and more popular, with 49 percent of deceased Americans being incinerated in 2015 ("Trends and Statistics" 2015). Conventional burial and cremation not only reveal, as Laderman suggests, a great deal about the values and principles undergirding dominant American culture, such as our willingness to pollute the soil, air, and water in our death rituals, but they also produce assemblages in which dead human bodies are needlessly implicated in unsustainable ecological practices. These assemblages—on the one hand, a body-formaldehyde-casket-vault-earth assemblage and, on the other, a body-fire-emissions-ash-air assemblage—give way to damaging ecological relations that are increasingly difficult to ignore.

Shifts in deathcare practices have been afoot in the United States since at least the late-1990s, when the first green burial ground opened in Westminster, South Carolina, along the banks of Ramsey Creek. As globalization continues to link all of us in more and more intricate webs, and as climate chaos makes its effects felt on scales both intimate

and grand, ecological concerns are surfacing in unexpected places. Granting that deathcare practices are neither neutral nor necessarily benign, at least from an ecological perspective, human death and the rituals surrounding it have become not only a religious, cultural, and legal issue but also something which ecological activists and entrepreneurs now confront as opportunities for critique and creation. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Erica Hayasaki (2013) declared that "death is having a moment" and Shannon Palus (2014) argued that, "As people become increasingly concerned with the environment, many of them are starting to seek out ways to minimize the impact their body has once they're done using it." To state it within the vernacular of this dissertation, activists and entrepreneurs are creating discourses of deathcare that make different sorts of mortal assemblages possible. The list of alternative deathcare practices includes *promession*, a system that freezes bodies with liquid nitrogen and then shakes them into a fine dust (Grundhauser 2016); *alkaline hydrolysis*, a technical process in which bodies are dissolved in a basic solution before being flushed into wastewater treatment systems (Olson 2014); Celestis, a company that flies cremated remains into outer space (its motto is "From the stars we are born, to the stars we will return..."); Capsula Mundi, a burial capsule that is infused with tree seeds ("Capsula Mundi" 2015); BioUrn, an urn that also contains seeds (Rogers 2016); and others. As the development of these and other practices suggests, we are living amidst momentous shifts in deathcare rituals and, thus, also amidst changing ideas of the human itself.

In the rest of this dissertation I demonstrate how the rhetorical fragments circulating in and around three alternative deathcare practices are recomposing what it means to be human by generating emergent ecological assemblages. In Chapter Two,

"Modes of Proceeding," I briefly explain my methodological approach, which combines what I term "rhetorical extrapolation" with the Deleuzo-Guattarian (1994) practice of creating concepts. In Chapter Three, "Dispersal: Conservation via Carnal Claims," I explore the rhetorical force of conservation burial, a practice of burying bodies in ways that prevent land from being developed in the future. Summoning works by Aldo Leopold, Michel Serres, and Jacques Derrida, I treat conservation burial as a means of writing the land that is productive of particular kinds of effects, including the radical dispersal of dead human bodies into local ecosystems. In Chapter Four, "Decomposition: Rhetorics of Urban Dirt-Work," I contemplate the rhetorical "dirt-work" that makes the Urban Death Project (UDP), an effort to design and develop human composting systems in cities across the world, such a disruptive ecological alternative. Against contemporary rhetorical theory's focus on the productive force of rhetoric, I suggest that we consider as well the decompositional force of material-symbolic practices. Rhetorics work not only to constitute or articulate subjects, but also to radically deteriorate the subject as such. In Chapter Five, "Digestion: The Risks and Promises of Consumption," I turn my attention to the Infinity Burial Project's (IBP) efforts to transform dead human bodies into food for mushrooms. After an extended detour through the works of Derrida, Donna Haraway, Val Plumwood, and Bennett on the relationship between subjectivity and consumption, I demonstrate how the IBP rhetorically composes the human in terms of its exposure, edibility, and ecological response-ability. Finally, in Chapter Six, "Notes Toward the Possibility of a Postmortem Politics," I zoom out from the specific case studies to consider ecological deathcare practices as openings for other ways of imagining and practicing modes of coexistence for ecological ongoingness. Conservation burial, human

composting, and mushroom burial suits collectively disrupt long-practiced deathcare rituals in the United States. They materialize the possibility that conventional burial and cremation are but two of many postmortem fates, and creatively yet practically recompose the human within ecological assemblages. They are rewriting the future of deathcare. Indeed, by gathering together familiar materials in new and disruptive ways, these deathcare practices are rhetorically subverting convention and generating alternative endings.

Inklings of Rupture: Diogenes and Abbey on Death

And yet, while the discourses of ecological deathcare that I explore in this dissertation mark a signal departure from contemporary, industrialized forms of interment they are, in fact, part of a long, though rarely rehearsed, history of alternative views towards death and deathcare. In general, the historian Thomas Laqueur (2015, 9) writes, "as far back as people have discussed the subject, care of the dead has been regarded as foundational—of religion, of the polity, of the clan, of the tribe, of the capacity to mourn, of an understanding of the finitude of life, of civilization itself." In the United States, the sense that deathcare is foundational has resulted in large-scale, corporatized versions of what were historically familial, community-driven activities. Moreover, burial and cremation are now so conventional that to opt out of the normative procedures for postmortem care is understood as a form of resistance. The taken-for-grantedness of what Jessica Mitford (2000) famously called the "American way of death" conceals alternative views toward death and deathcare, some of which are remarkably in line with the practices that occupy me throughout this dissertation. Two stories, widely separated by

time, are useful for grasping just how enduring the belief that human bodies ought to decompose with as little intervention as possible has been.

The first story takes us to ancient Greece where Diogenes the Cynic lived and died. Scornful of conventions of all sorts, Diogenes resisted societal norms in favor of the rhythms and cycles of nature. In addition to masturbating in public, Diogenes subverted tradition by requesting that his dead body not be buried but, on the contrary, be given over to animals that might consume it. This request is recounted in Cicero's (1927) *Tusculan Disputations*, in which the Roman philosopher meditates on, among other things, the subject of death. Cicero recounts first the death of Socrates, who asked his friends to bury his body as they saw fit (see Plato 1954), but quickly moves on to Diogenes, who, he writes,

> was rougher [than Socrates]; his feeling it is true was the same, but like a Cynic he spoke more harshly and *required that he should be flung out unburied*. Upon which his friends said: "To the birds and wild beasts?" "Certainly not," said he, "but you must put a stick near me to drive them away with." "How can you, for you will be without consciousness?" they replied. "What harm, then, can the mangling of wild beasts do me if I am without consciousness?" (124-125, emphasis mine)

Whether Diogenes' request to "be flung out unburied" was part of an intentional effort to live a more ecological life is beside the point. What matters, however, is that Diogenes described Greek burial practices as a kind of aberration when compared to his observations of the more-than-human world. Too much intervention at the moment of interment, he suggested, was pure folly since the person (equated here with consciousness) no longer inhabits the body (reduced to materiality) after death. Even if there is an immaterial afterlife, Diogenes surmised, it matters little what happens to the corpse because the soul evacuates it anyway at (or a little after) the moment of death.

Though Diogenes' view of burial might be founded on questionable assumptions about the relationship between minds and bodies, it nevertheless decenters the human by conceptualizing the corpse as potential food for other organisms.

The second story takes place some two millennia later, in the late-1980s, amidst the red rock country of the American southwest. Despite the temporal and spatial distance that separate these stories, the protagonist in this narrative shares several affinities with Diogenes. By many accounts, the author Edward Abbey was also a crass, convention-crushing cynic very much interested in the lessons we might learn from observing the natural world. His two most famous works—*Desert Solitaire* (1968) and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975)—take readers into harsh climates and ask them to consider the ways in which their own bodies connect them to the more-than-human world. Not long before he died in 1989, Abbey inscribed the following in a notebook: "If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture—that is immortality enough for me. And as much as anyone deserves" (Lamberton 2005). The body become carcass is nutritive for Abbey, something to be taken up and used by the many species with which humans coexist on planet Earth. Forcing the given order—what we typically call the "food chain"—out of kilter, in Abbey's vision humans become fodder for hungry plants and animals. And immortality is achieved neither by chemically endowing the cadaver with a lifelike glow nor by sequestering it from carnivorous microorganisms, but by dispersing the decaying body's latent energy throughout an ecosystem. Immortality, here, is ecological ongoingness. As in reincarnation myths, life carries on, just in a different form. Incorporated into the cellular structure of other flora and fauna, the human body does not so much go away as it shifts shape.

Needless to say, neither Diogenes's nor Abbey's requests exemplify dominant perspectives on death and deathcare in the United States today. Both thinkers eschewed societal expectations for a funeral and proper burial, preferring instead to have their bodies thrust into ecosystems where they could nourish other kinds of beings while contributing as little as possible to the folly of funereal extravagance. "The Cynic's argument," Laqueur (2015, 4) writes,

> has had lots of admirers but has never been persuasive for very long. Just as the dead body has always been disenchanted, it has also always been enchanted: powerful, dangerous, preserved, revered, feared, an object of ritual, a thing to be reckoned with.

The enchanted corpse is subject to all sorts of postmortem practices, though, that do serious damage to the very ecosystems that supported the life of the deceased. Conventional burial, for example, as it is practiced in the United States requires 827,000 gallons of toxic embalming fluids, 30 million board feet of hardwoods, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, 104,272 tons of steel, and 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete each year (Harker 2012). Unlike Diogenes, Abbey was aware of the ecological burdens of American burial practices and actively avoided them. Like Diogenes, though, Abbey was also alert to the potential of his own body to nourish the earth rather than pollute it. Both thinkers linked embodiment to death and death to the cycles of nature. As embodied, finite creatures, they each surmised, it makes little sense to shield our corpses from the deteriorating forces inherent in the more-than-human world. Their lesson? Embrace mortality.

Finitude: Notes on Death in Life

Death haunts nearly every instant of life. It permeates the human experience in ways which are easily apprehended and barely detected, both extraordinarily disruptive and mundanely ignorable, and in modes that are private, interpersonal, public, and political all at once. Just moving through the motions brings us each into close contact with death: we tread on soil that is made of decomposing remains; we consume the dead bodies of flora and fauna; and we clothe ourselves in garments constructed from plant fibers and animal skins. Private and public debates alike follow morbid paths: whether and how humans should socially condone and support the death penalty, physician-assisted suicide, and state-sponsored end-of-life care, not to mention the slaughter of billions of animals annually for our consumption and commercial gain, are all open-ended questions. Epidemics of all kinds spontaneously explode into public consciousness and stir our worst fears: in the 1980s, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) shocked Americans, setting off a persistent moral panic; today, the "C" word—cancer—seems to be on the tips of everyone's tongues; outbreaks of Ebola and SARS make even the healthy fear for their lives; and perennial occurrences of the common cold, flu, and pneumonia remind us all that the littlest cough can, and occasionally does, become lethal. And then there are the more intimate encounters with death: The death of a loved one (including a companion species) can leave us unmoored, psychologically and physically adrift in the wake of devastating personal loss. Unexpected deaths, such as those suffered during the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, may induce a sense of profound precariousness in the face of uncertain futures. And, of course, there is always the promise, looming somewhere on the horizon, of our own mortality. No one escapes

death: it is an incessant, even primordial, force which helps make us who and what we are. Death is always already at work composing the human.

Death exerts such force in part because it is constitutive of human being. That is, finitude is an integral, ontological component of the kinds of assemblages that human beings are, an element of our being which we can neither wish away nor evacuate. The existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1953, 11) famously defined "Dasein," his term for a "being [that is] concerned *about* its very being," in relation to finitude.[1] In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1953, 224) argues that, "The 'end' of being-in-the-world is death. This end, belonging to the potentiality of being, that is, to existence, limits and defines the possible totality of Dasein." That is, death has a strong constitutive function when it comes to shaping human beings. Death is not a thing that is ready-to-hand (like a hammer or a pencil) but is, rather, a possibility, and so must be conceptualized as a constitutive form of potential that inheres in Dasein. "The ending that we have in view when we speak of death," writes Heidegger, "does not signify a being-at-an-end of Dasein, but rather a *being toward the end* [...] of this being" (236). In other words, humans do not experience death *as such*. Rather, humans experience an incessant orientation towards death. As Dasein, we are always already "being-toward-death" insofar as we are living, which is to say, *insofar as we are dying*. To be living is to be

[1] In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida compellingly contends that Heidegger's invocation of "Dasein," though posited as a move away from humanism, in fact repeats well-worn notions of the human as near to itself in the form of self-consciousness. Having arrayed several quotations from Heidegger's (1953) *Being and Time*, Derrida (1982, 127) concludes that, "We can see that Dasein, though *not* man, is nevertheless *nothing other* than man. [...] The value of proximity, that is, of presence in general, therefore decides the essential orientation of this analytic of Dasein." I return to this issue throughout the central chapters, but especially in Chapter Five. Convinced, however, by Derrida's critique, I alternate between the terms Dasein and human in this section for clarity about the kind of assemblage I am discussing—human beings.

dying, and to be dying is to be always already in relation to death.[2] As Heidegger puts it, "it must be understood *as possibility*, cultivated *as possibility*, and *endured as possibility* in our relation to it" (250). Death, then, becomes horizontality, something which we anticipate but never quite touch experientially.

In this Heideggerian logic of finitude, the possibility of death makes Dasein meaningful. The very fact that one is mortal becomes the condition of possibility for meaningful existence since mortality implies finitude and because finitude entails an absolute end, an end from which one cannot recover. That Dasein ends, Heidegger surmises, is precisely why it takes on significance. "Death," Heidegger (1953, 241) writes, "is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus *death* reveals itself as one's *ownmost, nonrelational, and insuperable* [...] *possibility*." More simply put, death is always mine and no one else's, always gives rise to an individual, and is always inescapable. From this perspective, death is radical alterity: we cannot contemplate death as such, but only our possibility of ceasing to be the kinds of beings that we are. We know that death is certain, that it will come to pass, and that we cannot escape it. Thus, we know that we are dying even as we are living, that death is always on the horizon. The open question is how we respond to this intimate form of mortality.

When Dasein is understood as an orientation towards death, it can manifest in subtle forms of anticipation or in more fleshed out modes of anxiety. "Anxiety about death must not be confused with a fear of one's demise," Heidegger writes, "but, as a

---

[2] The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud similarly holds that an orientation to death is foundational for human experience. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (2015, 30) introduces the concept of the death drive, which he calls *thanatos,* or "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things," which he opposed to the "life instinct," or Eros.

fundamental attunement [...] of Dasein" (241). Feeling anxious about one's death is an acknowledgement of one's finitude and, thus, of one's kind of being. For Heidegger, such anxiety incites a more robust form of concern about what kind of being one is and, therefore, makes it possible to live more authentically. As he put it,

> *anticipation reveals in Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself, primarily unsupported by concern that takes care, but to be itself in passionate, anxious* ***freedom toward death****, which is free of the illusions of the they, factical, and certain of itself*. (255, emphases in original)

Put more simply, being anxious about one's death is a way of coming to terms with oneself as Dasein (a being that contemplates its being[-toward-death]) and, thus, of discarding societal expectations about how one ought to comport oneself toward death. Embracing finitude as a constitutive component of human being is, in other words, a means of delinking oneself from the willfully ignorant "they," which labors to keep death out of sight, out of mind.

While finitude is constitutive of human being, our relations to death are also socially facilitated and disciplined by cultural norms expressed in discourses of death and deathcare. Heidegger was principally interested in understanding death existentially, but it is possible as well to embark on a study of the various modes by which death is disclosed in a given time and place. There are, as Derrida (1993, 24) writes, "cultures of death. In crossing a border, one changes death." Death both means something different and is experienced differently depending on when and where one encounters it. For instance, the historian Philippe Ariès (1974) argues in *Western Attitudes Toward Death* that death has transformed from a familiar, even banal fact of life to something which can barely be spoken of in many Western societies. Heidegger (1953, 244) suggests

something similar when he writes that, "the they [...] justifies itself and makes itself respectable by silently ordering the way in which *one* is supposed to behave toward death in general." There are norms when it comes to dealing with death, and these norms are dependent to some extent on context. In the United States, for example, one finds contradictory norms: it is neither abnormal nor frowned upon to speak at length about the deaths of celebrities, but speaking about more familiar deaths for too long or too often marks one as particularly morbid. The normative demand to filter whether and how one deals publicly with one's own or another's death is a limitation on the possibilities of what Heidegger called anxiety: "*The they does not permit the courage to have anxiety about death*" (244, emphasis in original).

Death inundates human beings at multiple levels and in numerous ways, yet we are expected not to dwell too much on our finitude, to put death out of our minds, to go on living as if we were immortal. This is, at any rate, part of what drives Heidegger's (1953) concern—that we are culturally coached to suppress our anxieties about our own mortality and, as a consequence, that we diminish our understanding of ourselves as Dasein. Some thinkers call this attitude a form of "death denial." In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker (1997) contends that human beings do everything in their power to overlook their mortality. Becker writes that, "in man's physiochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal" (2) and, thus, "everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate" (27). Whereas Heidegger argues that meaning is found in an embrace of one's mortality, Becker suggests just the opposite: by denying one's finitude, he argues, humans are able to symbolically transcend the corpo-reality that destines them for death. Death denial is

materialized not only in a lack of public and private discourse about death but also in postmortem practices like conventional burial, which thwart bodily decomposition and attempt to preserve the body. As the eco-philosopher Val Plumwood (1999; 2008) argues, conventional burial practices in the West are an expression of human exceptionalism to the extent that they seek to preserve the dead human body for as long as possible by thwarting its interaction with more-than-human others.

Though I suspect that both Heidegger's (1953) and Becker's (1997) works on death each have some explanatory power, I am interested here in rhetorical practices that embrace finitude as a means of changing the world. Along this path, I follow Derrida who, following Heidegger, found in death a significant point of departure, if not the only real point of departure, for thinking the world anew.[3] Derrida (1993, 55), in *Aporias*, writes that,

> it is the originary and underivable character of death, as well as the finitude of the temporality in which death is rooted, that decides and forces us to decide to start from here first, from this side here. A mortal can only start from here, from his mortality.

Beginning with mortality is a way of acknowledging the kinds of beings which we are, as well as an opportunity to trespass against the more fashionable emphases on vitality and livability that currently predominate in academic circles. Mortality gives us something to think about precisely because it pushes us to the limits of the human. It raises questions about our relations not only with one another but also with the more-than-human world. The rhetorical practices I explore in the central chapters of *Mortal Assemblages* all begin

---

[3] It is worth noting here that my extended engagement with the Heideggerian (1953) concept of Dasein as "being-towards-death" serves a larger purpose within *Mortal Assemblages*. Not only does Heidegger furnish a significant theorization of humanity's relation to mortality, but his texts are foundational (even if only implicitly) for many of the thinkers whose ideas animate this text.

with the fact of finitude and then proceed to question the ways in which dead human bodies come into contact with other ecological elements like air, water, soil, and organisms that might consume them.

Thus, my thinking in *Mortal Assemblages* is decidedly and unapologetically morbid. From the Latin *morbidus*, meaning "diseased, sick, causing disease, unhealthy," the English word *morbid* is often associated with "excessive gloom or apprehension, or (in later use) by an unhealthy preoccupation with disease, death, or other disturbing subjects" ("Morbid, Adj." 2016). Although I am unconvinced that thinking about death is either "excessive" or "unhealthy," I find the word's resonance with a kind of obsessive contemplation useful. In cultures that systematically deny death, preoccupation might be in order as an antidote to the nearly myopic focus on living and life, that is, with bio-politics (see Foucault 1990; 2008). Thus, I dwell on the question of death in order to disrupt the ease with which human mortality escapes everyday engagement within ecological discourses. By embracing morbidity, we are pushed to ask not only how we can sustain life, prevent or forestall extinction, and shore up the conditions of coexistence (all important and worthwhile projects), but also how our own deaths and deathcare practices might be related to ongoing ecological calamities, as well as how shifting the terms of those practices might be in tune with an ecological view of relationality. Thus, morbidity must be delinked from nihilism: approaching ecology from a morbid perspective certainly entails thinking about and accepting death but not at the expense of life. Life and death need not be diametrically opposed; they are, in contrast, deeply and necessarily intertwined. Ecology is another name for these twin phenomena.

In *So Much Wasted*, Patrick Anderson (2010) theorizes what he calls a "politics of

morbidity." Anderson suggests that there is a rhetorical potency to death. In particular, he suggests that the physical deterioration of the human body makes possible new ways of thinking about and responding to the shared conditions of coexistence that give shape to both life and death (cf. Mbembe 2003; Murray 2006). As Anderson defines it, a politics of morbidity is "the embodied, interventional embrace of mortality and disappearance not as *destructive*, but as radically *productive* stagings of subject formations in which subjectivity and objecthood, presence and absence, life and death intertwine" (3). Death not only destroys life. It also creates life, or gives the conditions necessary for the production of life. As human bodies wither away, they do not simply disappear. Rather, their disappearance is also always an appearance of something else, a new kind of subject. Death veils and unveils in one and the same stroke.

A politics of morbidity centers on and works with the simultaneously destructive and productive aspects of death. "Morbidity is marked," Anderson (2010, 19) writes, "both by dying *and* by a preoccupation with dying […] morbidity is consciousness of the profoundly affective significance of one's own mortality." Grappling with death is a means of dealing with a profoundly singular event that nevertheless brings us into webs of interconnection and interdependency. All animate creatures die; we cannot deny this fact/fate. Thus, death connects all of us in a shared cycle of living, dying, decomposing, and being transformed. And yet, each creature, and thus each death, is absolutely singular. No one or no thing can take my place when it comes to dying. Attending to the ways in which death both individuates and collectivizes, the morbid approach to ecology deployed in *Mortal Assemblages* not only pushes us to think about the potentially productive aspects of death (and about the ecological significance of various deathcare

practices), but also about the status of the "subject" as it morphs and is transformed by its ecological enmeshment.

Exposure: The Outside Within

Or, we might say, following Heidegger (1953, 111), that the human "is taken over by [...] its world." Its worldliness means that the human is never alone in itself, by itself. The human is always given in its relations with others: "The world of Dasein is a *with-world* [...] Being-in is *being-with*," he writes (116). To put it differently: in our finitude, we are fundamentally exposed to the world. If death is the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein, this is so because mortality results from incessant forms of exposure. Mortality implies an openness to forces which simultaneously threaten and support life, forces which make life possible and foreclose upon it at the same time. As mortal beings, we are not simply open to all sorts of incursions from the outside, but are, rather, constituted by forces that are not of our own creation. The outside is already within us, composing us as the sorts of assemblages that we specifically are. The examples are practically endless. In a general sense, human beings are exposed to an abundance or lack of material resources such as water, food, land, clothing, warmth, and transportation; (lack of) prospects for employment, social support systems, state-funded welfare programs, insurance, and affordable short- and long-term medical care; rules of law, economics, culture, religion, and kinship formations; unpredictable and unavoidable natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, droughts, fires, and health epidemics, as well as their long-lasting consequences; other human beings who both care for and diminish one's quality of life; bacteria, viruses, and parasites; and more-than-human actors upon

whom we are reliant for things like oxygen, nutrients, minerals, pharmaceuticals, building materials, recreational enjoyment, and so forth. We become what we are in our exposure to these forces. Or, as David Abram (1996, 22) eloquently puts it in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, "We are human only in contact, and in conviviality, with what is not human."

We are exposed in our finitude precisely because we are embodied creatures. Our bodies, typically thought of as containers of the self, are in fact porous openings onto the world around us. Far from the impervious borders we might wish them to be, our bodies are dense contact zones where inside and outside blur into the assemblages we recognize as human beings. Western thinkers from Plato (2008) to René Descartes (1999) have chastised the human body as a deficient, dubious element of human being, preferring instead to locate humanity in the mind or soul. Descartes's famous statement, *cogito ergo sum* ("Je pense, donc je suis"; "I think therefore I am"), encapsulates this view and has for centuries enshrined the notion that what makes us human is above all our capacity to think and respond rationally. Thinkers in the Cartesian tradition routinely bracket out the human body or condemn it for precisely the reasons I hope to highlight here.

The human body is indeed opened up, exposed, and this is what makes us the kinds of beings that we are. In "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida (2002) deconstructs the too-easy equivocation between rationality and humanity by engaging with "the question of the animal," which is also the question of corporeality. More-than-human animals have historically been reduced to their embodiment, for the most part stripped of the capacity for rational or intellectual activity, and given over as the objects of human control and mastery, as in many interpretations of the biblical

decrees in Genesis. Over and against this dominant view of humans as primarily thinking beings, Derrida thinks the human as "following" animals in both the biological-evolutionary sense that we descend from other animals and in the sense that we are the kinds of beings we are because we are, first of all, animals. In other words, it is our animality and embodiment that matter first to the kinds of beings we are. Everything else proceeds on this condition of corporeality.

In our corporeality, we are given over to forms of relationality that we cannot entirely control or predict. Since our bodies are dense openings to the world, scenes of fundamental exposure, we are always already composed in our relations with others. In this way, it becomes difficult to tell myself apart from the others who make me what I am. Bodies bleed and leak into one another. The ecological literary theorist Stacy Alaimo (2010) suggests that a more accurate term for this condition of embodied exposure is "trans-corporeality," a word which highlights the extent to which bodies are always overlapping and crossing one another in consequential ways. The prefix "trans-" calls attention to how bodies never exist on their own, but constantly cross one another in the making of the world. As Alaimo (2010, 2) puts it in *Bodily Natures*, "trans-corporeality" names the "material interconnections between the human and the more-than-human world"; it also "indicates movement across different sites," which "opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors." As various bodies are composed together in different ways, they seep into and impact one another. The human body provides a remarkable example of trans-corporeality: not only are "we" made up of many others, including several sorts of bacteria, and in that sense an

ecosystem in our own right, but "we" constantly re- and deterritorialize the ecological assemblages to which we belong. Trans-corporeality is another name for assemblages: even as bodies are contained by porous boundaries, those weak limits expose them to other trans-corporeal bodies. Trans-corporeality is embodiment minus guarantees, plus collective becoming.

Thus, corporeality is the condition of our ecological enmeshment. As embodied creatures, we become interconnected and interdependent with others in consequential relations. Like Alaimo, Timothy Morton (2010) conceptualizes corporeality not as an enclosure but as an opening for such relations. "The surfaces of living beings," he writes, "are envelopes and filters, thick regions where complex chemical transfers and reactions take place. [...] The more we know, the less self-contained living beings become" (36). Human skin offers a useful example of trans-corporeality: human skin is porous (not only do we absorb all sorts of nutrients through our skin but we also release sweat to cool our bodies) and teeming with life (all sorts of bacteria, benign and otherwise, occupy the space of our largest organ). What trans-corporeality reminds us is that the body itself, despite its appearance of boundedness, is an important space where human and more-than-human comingle in consequential ways. All corporeal beings are always already trans-corporeal becomings.

Trans-corporeality also focuses attention on the transformative force of various forms of exposure. As such, trans-corporeality does not simply name the ontological status of human beings, but, rather, invites us to see the form of the human as always already in flux. Form changes as relationships change. Expose a human body to high levels of radiation, for example, and watch as it transforms. Or, throw a human into a pen

with hungry grizzly bears and witness the privileged human body quickly reenter the food web in spectacular fashion. One of the foremost thinkers of relationality, Donna Haraway (2008), argues that we *become* what we are only in relation to other kinds of beings, human and more-than-human alike. She develops a terminology of "becoming-with" to counteract the sense of stability which the word "being" imposes on our understanding of human beings. Haraway contends that,

> We are in the midst of webbed existences, multiple beings in relationship, this animal, this sick child, this village, these herds, these labs, these neighborhoods in a city, these industries and economies, these ecologies linking natures and cultures without end. This is a ramifying tapestry of shared being/becoming among critters (including humans) in which living well, flourishing, and being 'polite' (political/ethical/in right relation) mean staying inside shared semiotic materiality. (72)

These "webbed existences" of which we are "in the midst" are the relational ontologies of exposure upon which our very selves depend. We become only in the midst of such relationships with human and more-than-human others, including those we know and do not know, those which strengthen our capacities to act and those which weaken them. These relations take shape in what Haraway calls "contact zones," or the "mortal world-making entanglements" (4) where things happen. The human body is one such contact zone: a scene where heterogeneous materials—the bits of us that are human, bacteria of all sorts, nutrients, minerals, synthetic chemicals—converge to produce the assemblages we recognize as human. The assembled materials usually coordinate to sustain our bodies, to maintain life, but they also function to foreclose upon life. Becoming-with in mortal contact zones is the name of the game for ecological coexistence.

So far, I have been giving exposure a positive spin. I understand exposure as a foundational and inescapable part of what it means to be a thing in the world, and as a

defining element of corpo-reality (embodied existence) that we cannot do without. However, just as Heidegger (1953) and Becker (1997) argue that humans usually strive to forget about their own mortality, so too have humans historically attempted to ignore or overcome their exposure to the world. This history of avoiding exposure can be glimpsed in the development of deathcare practices in the United States from the mid-1860s forward. The American Civil War ruptured long held funereal traditions. Prior to the war, when someone died, their body would have been kept in a cool part of the home and cared for by family and friends until being buried, inside a simple wooden casket or cloth shroud, in a nearby churchyard (Harris 2007; Laderman 1996). Up to this point, deathcare in the United States was a familial, community affair. During the Civil War, however, soldiers died far from home, complicating usual ritual practices and creating the conditions for the birth and development of the modern funeral industry. Families demanded that the bodies of their fallen sons be returned home, but geography, weather, and transportation technologies thwarted efforts to reunite staggering numbers of dead bodies with their families. By the time a body could be transported home by train it would usually have already begun decomposing. To remedy this, the ancient art of embalming, historically shunned by most Christians in the United States (Laderman 2003), was invoked as a means of preserving the soldiers' bodies. Mobile embalming operations were set up on the edges of battlefields, and bodies were pumped full of formaldehyde so that they might be preserved long enough to endure the train ride home without succumbing to the inevitable—decay. In the decades that followed, an array of practices and products were assembled into a funeral industry run by a professional class of undertakers.

One way of interpreting the rise of the modern funeral industry is as a series of attempts to overcome the body's fundamental exposure to the world. Corpses raise all sorts of issues of exposure both for the body itself and for survivors. Consider this typical sequence of postmortem events: First, a person dies and a family member calls the local funeral home, whose employees rush to the scene of death to whisk the body away to a morgue. Hence, the survivors are spared the burden (or joy) of dealing with the body themselves—of washing the body, dressing it, visiting it, preparing it for burial, and so forth. Second, if the body is going to be buried, and especially if it is going to be shown in an open casket, it is very likely that someone at the funeral home will embalm the body. Though not required by law, most funeral home directors insist on embalming as a means of preserving the body and, thus, of protecting survivors from witnessing the unfolding process of decomposition. Thus, the body itself is shielded from exposure to the inevitability of decay for a while. Embalming fluids have the further effect of imbuing the corpse with a lifelike glow, enabling survivors to see their loved one as if they were still alive (Troyer 2007). Third, it is likely that the body will be placed inside a heavy (and expensive) casket, which will be placed inside a reinforced concrete vault before being buried on a small plot of land promised (for a price) indefinitely to just this corpse. Caskets and vaults further estrange the corpse from the forces of nature that would otherwise speed up the decomposition process. Enclosed in multiple layers of wood, metal, and concrete, the corpse is seemingly closed off from the more-than-human world. Of course, each of these postmortem practices exposes the corpse to still other kinds of forces. Embalming is an especially strange force confronting millions of corpses: corpses are drained of their internal fluids, toxic preservatives are pumped inside, and the

body is plugged up so that it does not leak (Harris 2007; Roach 2003). Not only does embalming pose groundwater contamination risks (Chiappelli and Chiappelli 2008), but it also exposes funeral workers to elevated chances of certain types of cancer (Harris 2007, 41). Thus, even in attempting to diminish postmortem exposure, the body remains inescapably exposed to the world.

By emphasizing finitude and exposure, I am attempting neither to efface the human nor to posit an idea that the human somehow falls away in the wake of ecological thinking. It is simply untenable to suggest that something like "the human" does not exist. By arguing that the human is better understood not as an individual entity but as a dense layering of networked relations forged in its exposure to the world, I am suggesting instead that we need to attend very specifically to divergent compositions that assemble the human differently. In *What Is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe (2010, xxv)

> insists that we attend to the specificity of the human—its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing—by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is.

Following Wolfe, who was following Derrida and others, I am concerned with thinking the human in its particularity. Rather than affirming a transparent human subject characterized by self-consciousness, autonomy, and boundedness, any serious attempt at understanding what it means to be human must account for the sorts of relations that exposure entails. As Judith Butler (2009, 3) argues, "to be a [human] body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology." Highlighting embodied exposure does not preclude acknowledging that the human has "ways of knowing" but instead couches those forms of understanding in

the densely woven webs of relationality that make the human possible in the first place. Doing so makes it impossible to ignore the ecosystems in which we are always already entangled.

If there is a lesson lurking in this discussion of exposure, it is that any approach to the question of the human must be refracted through ecology. Ecology is not an optional way of thinking about how human beings are in the world, but a necessary alternative to the individualizing narratives that normally shape our understandings of the human. Ecology is the condition both of finitude and of exposure—it is the inescapable relational context in which we live and die. We are exposed not to the world as such but to specific ecosystems and all the attendant human and more-than-human actors that entails. Conceptualizing the human in explicitly ecological terms is a way of recognizing not only how we are materially entangled and enmeshed in these biotic communities but also of better grasping the ontological conditions of exposure that we cannot will away. It is a step towards, Morton (2010, 7) contends, "becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, and mineral." In probing these connections, we feel our way into new ontologies. Thus, thinking ecologically about the human is a way of restoring all the complexity of exposure to our sense of who and what we are. Plumwood (2008, 73) argues that, "an ecological understanding of the self can point towards such reshaping narratives and practices, of which we stand so greatly in need." It is towards some of those practices that I soon turn.

Response-Ability: Rhetoric and the Challenge of Coexistence

I have written at length about the issues of finitude and exposure because they are, I believe, the absolute condition of possibility for rhetorical response. Precisely because we are exposed in our finitude—to human and more-than-human others; to forces of nature, law, economics, culture, and religion; and to the sometimes violent, sometimes sustaining work of strangers—we are called upon and capacitated to respond to those forces that impinge upon us. Such responses are not simply retrospective attempts to make sense of the world or to persuade others that something ought to change. More significantly, rhetorical responses become forces in the world. These forces coalesce around the challenges of coexistence. Exposure creates in us a necessity of response to conditions which are not all, or even mostly, of our own making, but rather imposed upon us in our exposure. If we were not exposed, there would be no need for rhetorical response. Indeed, there would be nothing to respond *to* because we would be the kinds of autonomous, self-enclosed, free-willed beings that certain thinkers have made us out to be. Exposure entails, however, a lack of control, a loss of autonomy, an openness to what is not us, and multiple impingements upon our will that we cannot will away. Such incursions demand responses of several sorts, and rhetoric is one of our key modes of responding.

The relationship between exposure and rhetorical response is detailed in Diane Davis's (2010; 2011) work on rhetoricity, which offers an important precedent for my claims here. Drawing especially from the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Davis articulates a theory not of rhetoric but of rhetoricity. Rhetoricity, she argues, is "an affect*ability* or persuad*ability,*" which serves as "the condition of symbolic activity" (2010, 2). These

dual *abilities* can be summed up as capacities to affect and be affected, to act and be acted upon by others. Rhetoric emerges out of conditions of being-with or becoming-with others to the extent that one can only respond from within the condition of embodied *with*ness. And while others have accounted for the enduring role of the body in rhetoric (e.g., Hawhee 2006), Davis locates in the body's exposure to the world what she calls the "preoriginary" source of rhetorical activity. Indeed, Davis (2011, 89) suggests that "rhetoric, at its most elemental, takes place at the level of the creature" and is thus "not first of all an essence or property '*in* the speaker' (a natural function of biology) but an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality." One responds to and within the relationships one finds oneself a part of or enmeshed in. Rhetorical activity is one means of negotiating those forms of relationality that, while we cannot simply wish them away, are also neither stable nor permanent. Thinking of rhetoric as a response to exposure is a means of acknowledging both that humans are impinged upon from the outside and that humans are able to impinge upon their conditions of coexistence.

Following Davis, I am positing a concept of rhetoric as one among several means of negotiating coexistence, of grappling with the circumstances into which we have been thrown, of shifting the relationships that take shape within dynamic ecosystems, and of composing assemblages whose effects ramify throughout biotic communities on timescales that exceed any individual human life. This sense of rhetoric is entrenched in what Morton calls "the ecological thought," which is a thinking of interconnectedness and interdependency. "Ecology," writes Morton (2010, 4), "includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is

always coexistence. No man is an island." By thinking rhetoric ecologically we are forced to begin not from the old categories of sender, receiver, message, and context, which preserve the subject as an intentional actor within determinable contexts, but, rather, from the messy entanglements of mortal coexistence where what it means to be human, as well as what it means to inhabit ecosystems, are at stake. Ecologically speaking, rhetorics cannot be conceived of as somehow *outside* the ecosystem. Rhetorics do not simply re-present ecosystem relations, nor do they function merely as deliberate efforts to persuade other human beings to inhabit those relations differently. Rather, from an ecological perspective rhetorics are always already at work composing, decomposing, and recomposing relations in real time. Just as humans, more-than-human animals, natural disasters, and climate cycles impact ecosystems, so too do rhetorics exert force on the forms of relationality that simultaneously threaten and sustain life.

Students of rhetoric have long recognized the force with which it moves (in) the world. Following Plato, however, many of the more prominent commentators have framed rhetorical force in more or less skeptical terms. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Plato (2005) famously condemned rhetoric on the grounds that, although it might induce some good, it has the potential, in the wrong hands, to convince citizens that the wrong is right, that the bad is good. Rhetoric, which was then largely associated with speeches given by prominent leaders in society, was opposed to philosophy, the search for wisdom and truth. So positioned, rhetoric appeared as the dangerous supplement to a philosophy of the good and true. Similarly, scholars indebted to the Marxist tradition routinely condemn rhetoric on the grounds that it is, first, distinct from material reality and, second, always in some sense in service of deceiving audiences by instilling in them a form of

false consciousness (e.g., Cloud 1994). The false consciousness furnished by rhetoric in the form of ideology, such scholars contend, is opposed to a true consciousness borne out of materiality. The Platonic and Marxist traditions are just two examples of a more fundamental point: even when scholars seek to detract from the status of rhetoric, they usually are forced to admit the force with which rhetorics move in the world. These traditions, however, are hemmed in by ideological projects that determine from the outset an (often negative) orientation to rhetoric. For these thinkers, force is predetermined as the negative characteristic of rhetoric, something to be suspicious of, something even to condemn. Abandoning the moralizing of the *Phaedrus* and Marxism's focus on false consciousness, Derrida (1981) offers a more intriguing third way in *Dissemination*. There he mines Plato's use of the word "pharmakon" to describe rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, noting that the word originally meant both "poison" and "cure." For Derrida, as for me, rhetoric exerts numerous forces in the world—some better than others for certain ends. The challenge of approaching rhetoric, then, is to do so without assuming the approach of the skeptic from the very beginning.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, my interest in rhetoric is not, primarily, driven by either a desire to criticize or to praise but, rather, to understand and render sensible the force of rhetorics as they move (through) the world. The fundamental question for me is not whether a particular rhetorical practice is true or not, nor whether it serves some apparently positive end, but, rather, what rhetorical practices do, what they accomplish, what sorts of relations they authorize or disable, what kinds of assemblages they help to compose. In asking these questions, I find considerable resources in the theoretical project outlined by Michael Calvin McGee (1975; 1980a; 1980b; 1990) during the latter

third of the 20th century. McGee insisted on treating rhetoric as a kind of force. In his essay on "the People," for instance, he argued that rhetorics have the force of temporarily defining who counts as part (or not) of a particular collectivity: "the people," he wrote, "are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals" (1975, 242). Force here takes on the quality of pressure, the capacity to hold things in place for a while. Like Nietzsche (1999), McGee understood rhetorics as having the capacity to contingently, temporarily fix our understandings of the world.

Although the notion of rhetorical force remains to be rigorously theorized (e.g., Foley 2013), exploring rhetoric's capacities to make things happen is an important means of understanding the force with which rhetorics move. Maurice Charland's (1987) theory of "constitutive rhetoric" moves us in one potential direction, asking us to consider the ways in which rhetorics are deployed to constitute collective identities. For reasons partially outlined in Chapter Four, I find articulation theory to be a more explanatory framework. For instance, Kevin DeLuca (1999a; 1999b) extends McGee's argument by framing rhetoric through articulation theory. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) work, DeLuca demonstrates how rhetorics do not mediate relations among pre-existing subjects with thoughts and ideas of their own but, rather, how rhetorics "articulate" the very subject positions from which individuals think, speak, and act in the world (see also Biesecker 1989; 1992). Articulation is the doubled practice of "speaking forth elements and linking elements" into a "temporary unity" (DeLuca 1999a, 335). Thus, articulation has the effect of provisionally composing relations among disparate and heterogeneous elements into something new. From this perspective, the

force of rhetoric is manifested most powerfully, then, not in the self-reflexive activities of deliberation and persuasion but instead in the prior and ongoing production of the very rhetors who understand themselves to be certain kinds of beings and the contexts in which they dwell.

Rhetorics form assemblages. They perform the doubled function that DeLuca (1999a, 335) outlines: on the one hand, rhetorics "speak forth," or enunciate, potential connections among elements and, on the other hand, rhetorics "link" those elements into assemblages. In one and the same stroke, rhetorics operate symbolically and materially: their material-symbolic force is always already an intertwined set of forces. Rhetorics are, thus, not simply epistemological but are, rather, ontological. They help us understand the world, that is, they furnish an understanding of the world, but they also participate in the production of that world. "An assemblage," argues Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 22–23), "in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously." These flows, or forces, are entangled at every level with rhetoric. Deleuze and Guattari again: "There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality [...] and a field of representation [...] and a field of subjectivity" (23). These fields flow into one another in the contingent form of every assemblage. For instance, the body-formaldehyde-casket-vault-earth assemblage of conventional burial in the United States collapses reality, representation, and subjectivity by gathering together heterogeneous materials into something that simultaneously carries material and symbolic loads and that really impacts the composition of other assemblages within ecosystems.

As compositional forces in the world, rhetorics also call on actors to respond to these gatherings in different ways. Rhetorics, in other words, produce response-abilities,

or capacities to act in and on the world. These response-abilities are nothing other than the (re)production of (other) assemblages, gatherings which have certain functions and exert particular kinds of force. To cite a now-familiar example, the body-formaldehyde-casket-vault-earth assemblage is first of all rhetorically articulated to the concept of the dignity of the deceased. Conventional burial makes sense in relation to this conceptual background of dignity which must be sustained through what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call a "collective assemblage of enunciation," a discursive apparatus that makes this assemblage sensible. Within this assemblage of enunciation, as authors like Mitford (2000) and Roach (2003) have demonstrated, the dead body is rhetorically imbued with significance and, thus, demands respect in the form of lavish displays of postmortem love and devotion. The resulting assemblage, what John Troyer (2007) calls the "post-mortem subject," is treated as both dead and alive, simultaneously a corpse and a subject. As this example highlights, rhetorics are often invoked to shore up the boundaries of the human. There is an entire anthropocentric rhetorical history waiting to be written that would attest to the anxieties driving human efforts to position themselves outside of and apart from the more-than-human world.

In *Mortal Assemblages*, I turn away from the sorts of postmortem assemblages which have long held sway in the United States to extensively grapple with emergent ecological discourses of death and deathcare, as well as with the assemblages they are composing. In tracing the rhetorical articulation of mortal assemblages—conservation burial, human composting, and consumptive reciprocity—I am also tracking modes of resistance that cut across and transform our sense of what it means to be human and to be always already enmeshed in ecosystems. In this sense, I willingly embrace the mantle of

critical rhetoric as distilled by Barbara Biesecker (1992, 361): “the task,” she writes, “is to trace new lines of making sense by taking hold of the sign whose reference has been destabilized by and through practices of resistance, lines that cut diagonally across and, thus disrupt, the social weave.” Following the transversal lines furrowed out by creative, alternative practices is a means of making sense of the world not as it is but as it might be, of grasping assemblages still in the making, and of rendering sensible the forms of response that reveal themselves in the wake of novel postmortem gatherings. Thus, in tracing the composition of these other assemblages, I am tracing as well the articulation of emergent forms of rhetorical response-ability that will help to shape our capacities for and modes of ecological coexistence.

Works Cited

Abbey, Edward. 1968. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine Books.

———. 1975. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Philadelphia: Harper Perennial.

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Anderson, Patrick. 2010. *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performativity, and the Morbidity of Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ariès, Philippe. 1974. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Translated by Patricia M. Ranum. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Becker, Ernest. 1997. *The Denial of Death*. 1 edition. New York: Free Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Biesecker, Barbara. 1989. "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of Différance." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22 (2): 110–30.

———. 1992. "Michel Foucault and the Question of Rhetoric." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25 (4): 351–64.

Burke, Kenneth. 1966. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

"Capsula Mundi." 2015. Accessed October 16. http://www.capsulamundi.it/progetto_eng.html.

Charland, Maurice. 1987. "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (2): 133–50.

Chiappelli, Jeremiah, and Ted Chiappelli. 2008. "Drinking Grandma: The Problem of Embalming." *Journal of Environmental Health* 71 (5): 25–28.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 1927. *Tusculan Disputations*. Translated by J. E. King. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cloud, Dana. 1994. “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric.” *Western Journal of Communication* 58: 141–63.

Davis, Diane. 2010. *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

———. 2011. “Creaturely Rhetorics.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44 (1): 88–94.

DeLanda, Manuel. 2016. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 1999a. “Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32 (4): 334–48.

———. 1999b. *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1981. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

———. 1993. *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

———. 2002. “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow).” Translated by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2): 369–418.

Descartes, Rene. 1999. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy, 4th Ed.* Translated by Donald A. Cress. 4th edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Foley, Megan. 2013. “Of Violence and Rhetoric: An Ethical Aporia.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (2): 191–99.

Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I*. Edited by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

———. 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.

———. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Picador.

Freud, Sigmund. 2015. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Dover Publications.

Grundhauser, Eric. 2016. "A Burial Machine That Will Freeze Your Corpse, Vibrate It to Dust, and Turn It Into Soil." *Atlas Obscura*, February 25. http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/a-burial-machine-that-will-freeze-your-corpse-vibrate-it-to-dust-and-turn-it-into-soil.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harker, Alexandra. 2012. "Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25 (1): 150–59.

Harris, Mark. 2007. *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. New York: Scribner.

Hawhee, Debra. 2006. "Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36 (2): 155–64.

Hayasaki, Erica. 2013. "Death Is Having a Moment." *The Atlantic*, October 25. http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/death-is-having-a-moment/280777/.

Heidegger, Martin. 1953. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.

"Human, Adj. and N." 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed December 11. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/view/Entry/89262.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Laderman, Gary. 1996. *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

———. 2003. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lamberton, Ken. 2005. "His Preferred Immortality." *Los Angeles Times*, September 20. http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/20/news/os-wildwest20.

Laqueur, Thomas W. 2015. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.

McGee, Michael Calvin. 1975. “In Search of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (3): 235–49.

———. 1980a. “‘Social Movement’: Phenomenon or Meaning?” *Central States Speech Journal* 31: 233–44.

———. 1980b. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1): 1–16.

———. 1990. “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture.” *Western Journal of Communication* 54 (3): 274–89.

Mitford, Jessica. 2000. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Vintage.

“Morbid, Adj.” 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed July 24. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/view/Entry/122122.

Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Murray, Stuart J. 2006. “Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life.” *Polygraph* 18: 191–215.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. “On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense.” In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, 141–53. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Olson, Philip R. 2014. “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States.” *Science, Technology & Human Values* 39 (5): 666–93.

Palus, Shannon. 2014. “How to Be Eco-Friendly When You’re Dead.” *The Atlantic*, October 30. http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/how-to-be-eco-friendly-when-youre-dead/382120/.

Plato. 1954. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. New York: Penguin Books.

———. 2005. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Christopher Rowe. New York: Penguin Books.

———. 2008. *Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plumwood, Val. 1999. “Being Prey.” In *The New Earth Reader: The Best of Terra Nova*, edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus. 76-91: MIT Press.

———. 2008. “Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death.” *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 5: 69–75.

Roach, Mary. 2003. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Rogers, Katie. 2016. "Mushroom Suits, Biodegradable Urns and Death's Green Frontier." *The New York Times*, April 22. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/business/mushroom-suits-biodegradable-urns-and-deaths-green-frontier.html.

Rumble, Hannah, John Troyer, Tony Walter, and Kate Woodthorpe. 2014. "Disposal or Dispersal? Environmentalism and Final Treatment of the British Dead." *Mortality* 19 (3): 243–60.

"Trends and Statistics." 2015. *National Funeral Directors Association*. http://nfda.org/about-funeral-service-/trends-and-statistics.html#cremationburial.

Troyer, John. 2007. "Embalmed Vision." *Mortality* 12 (1): 22–47.

Weaver, Richard M. 1985. "The *Phaedrus* and the Nature of Rhetoric." In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, 3–26. Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press.

Wolfe, Cary. 2010. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CHAPTER TWO

MODES OF PROCEEDING

Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari,
sed intelligere. (Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse,
but to understand.)

— Baruch Spinoza (2005), *Political Treatise*

What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins.

— Friedrich Nietzsche (1999, 146),
"On Truth and Lying In a Nonmoral Sense"

Mortal Assemblages is a sustained effort to think with and about emergent transformations to three interrelated domains—death, ecology, and the human. It is also a struggle to slow down and to grapple with what is animating those changes, with how they are being made to happen, and with what those alterations might mean for an ultimately unpredictable future. In particular, this dissertation deals with the rhetorical

force of heterogeneous textual fragments disseminating during the historical present, an enduring moment marked by ruptures of all sorts. Not only does *Mortal Assemblages* trace the intertwined rhetorics of death and ecology emanating out of entrepreneurial efforts to reimagine and remake deathcare practices, but it also performs ruptures of its own. Pushing rhetorical theory, throughout this dissertation I create several concepts to help explain how rhetorics mediate relationships among human and more-than-human actants in complex and ever-changing ecosystems.

Method is a simultaneously common and terrifying word in rhetorical circles, for it connotes something both ambiguous and precise about the ways in which we perform our labor as critics and theorists. The English word *method* has its etymological roots in the Greek *μέθοδος*, meaning "pursuit of knowledge" or "mode of investigation" and in the Latin *methodus*, which means "mode of proceeding." Beginning in the 16th century, variations of the word *method* were incorporated into most of the Romance languages and became associated with logical, rational, and, eventually, scientific procedures designed to yield factual knowledge ("Method, N." 2016). The legacy of these lexical shifts is felt today in several sedimented ideas of the "scientific method," which was systematically outlined and made popular by 17th-century thinkers Francis Bacon and René Descartes but which has a much longer history spanning multiple continents and centuries. While testing hypotheses via experiments remains a privileged methodology throughout much of the academy, qualitative and humanistic scholars in numerous disciplines have developed methods of their own to study and better understand their objects of inquiry.

Contemporary rhetorical scholars employ a diverse range of methods, including

close reading (Leff and Sachs 1990), contextualization (McGee 1990), philosophical analysis (Biesecker 1992a), ideological criticism (Cloud 1994), iconic analysis (Hariman and Lucaites 2007), historicism (Finnegan 2008), content analysis (Friedman, Gorney, and Egolf 1987), media studies (DeLuca 1999b), ethnography (Pezzullo 2007), and field research (Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres 2011), to name only a few. Each of these methods highlights certain aspects of rhetoric while downplaying others. Rather than being hemmed in by only one or two methodological practices, rhetorical scholars are increasingly fashioning themselves as great importers and practitioners of manifold methods. Such methodological pluralism has its advantages and disadvantages, not least of which is a somewhat persistent ambiguity about precisely *how* rhetorical scholars come to certain conclusions. Yet, we do not need to embrace the notion of method embedded within the scientific method in order to perform rigorous and precise research. Returning to the Greek and Latin understandings of method as a "mode of investigation" or, more to my liking, a "mode of proceeding," methods are perhaps better conceptualized for our purposes as the various practices we engage as we do our work. In this sense, rhetorical methods need not be oriented toward making truth claims but, instead, toward helping us understand how and why particular textual fragments *might be* impacting social relations. Scholars have an obligation to their readers to make those modes of proceeding evident.

Thus, in the remainder of Chapter Two I offer a brief accounting of my own "modes of proceeding." I begin with the question of beginnings, with the points of departure that have animated *Mortal Assemblages*. From there, I make explicit some of the more significant theoretical and methodological inheritances that have given this

dissertation its particular shape and style. I do this as a way of marking my debts. I then explain more specifically how I approached the multimedia rhetorical fragments that animate the central chapters. I close by describing the practice and products of conceptual creation, which I suspect might be the most enduring aspects of this dissertation. These meditations are offered not as a prescription for future projects (though they will perhaps inspire others to make their own methods more explicit), but, rather, as an explanation of the various kinds of labor that have gone into the production of the text you are now reading.

Ruptures: Points of Departure

To proceed is to set out from some where or some thing. Setting out in several directions, *Mortal Assemblages* is concerned with ruptures of many kinds and on multiple scales. The ruptures that motivate this project are simultaneously practical, political, and philosophical; they revolve around how we (*Homo sapiens* in the global West) think about and respond to our own embodiment, mortality, and enmeshment in broader ecosystems. They demand our attention to the extent that they entail radical alterations in how we compose ourselves in relation to the more-than-human world that both threatens and sustains us. They force us to think of our bodies variously as ecologically enmeshed, as compostable, and as edible. In doing do, they rupture presumptions of individuality, autonomy, identity, and boundedness that have been linked to the figure of the human throughout much of Western thinking.

Such ruptures induce thinking. In his magnum opus, *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze (1994, 139) compellingly contends that, “Something in the world forces

us to think." Compelled by the intensity of something in the world, we are made to think, made to slow down and to contemplate sets of relationships that challenge whatever we have henceforth taken for granted. As Deleuze contends, thinking always takes off from somewhere as a result of an encounter with something which cannot be easily understood, assimilated, or passed over. Only when challenged in or by an encounter do we respond with thought. Indeed, most of us move through daily life, Deleuze suggests, in a habitually unthinking way. It is only when "the claws of absolute necessity" impose upon us, Deleuze contends, that we begin to think (139). Unless or until we are forced to think about something, say, how we deal with our own and others' dead bodies, we are likely to proceed without giving that which otherwise might induce consideration much thought at all. In everyday life, convention and tradition substitute for serious thought. Serious inquiry always begins with an eruptive force that demands thinking.

Given that the textual fragments I grapple with throughout this dissertation deal with relationships among humans, death, and ecology, the forces which have compelled me to think have often taken on an undeniably visceral, bodily dimension. For example while I was a master's student at Indiana University, I came across the Infinity Burial Project in the form of a filmed TED Talk given by the project's founder, Jae Rhim Lee (2011). In that video, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five, Lee talks of feeding bits and pieces of her body to flesh-eating mushrooms as she stands on stage clothed in a head-to-toe "mushroom death suit." Shielded by age and circumstance from any serious engagement with mortality, I was taken aback by Lee's proposition to turn dead human bodies into food for mushrooms. Spurred by Lee's descriptions of what that process might look like, I imagined my own corpse being consumed by mushrooms (a kind of

edible matter I detested in 2011 but have since come to enjoy in small doses). A bit sickened by this thought, I put the Infinity Burial Project mostly out of mind for a year before—goaded by a haunting sense of responsibility to think with and through what disgusts—I returned to the image of the corpse as edible matter in a more hospitable mood/mode. I was learning how, as Julia Kristeva (1982, 3) writes in *Powers of Horror*, "corpses *show* [us] what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live" by placing each of us "at the border of [our] condition as a living being."

Many of the textual fragments I think with in *Mortal Assemblages* also enact ruptures by opening onto questions that bring broader ecological networks into view. For instance, the Urban Death Project, which I take up extensively in Chapter Four, did not force me to think simply because it proposes to transform dead human bodies into soil via a large-scale composting system. It also fundamentally ruptures the way that we conceptualize the human body by disintegrating the boundaries among multiple human bodies comingling and decomposing alongside one another. Individuals quickly become multiplicities. And as soon as the human body is no longer discussed in its singularity, it is not long before interconnectivity and interdependency enter into and forcefully impinge upon the scene of thought. Not only does the Urban Death Project's insistence on composting humans allegorically call up images of mass graves in Nazi Germany but it also surges forth as an immanent image of ecological enmeshment. As such, it conjures what Timothy Morton (2010) has called "the ecological thought," which is a thinking of interconnectedness. As Morton writes, however, "Interconnectedness isn't snug and cozy. There is intimacy [...] but not predictable, warm fuzziness" (31). Thus, part of the force of the textual fragments assembled together and studied throughout this dissertation

emerges out of their capacity not only to surprise or to startle at a visceral level but also to make us think in extrapolative ways, in ways that start with micropolitical practices taking place on (literally) the ground and that then radiate outward to articulate connections and compose relations that cause us to pause, to contemplate, and, potentially, to inhabit the world differently.

Inheritances: Gifts for Thought

Though ruptures of several sorts have forced me to think again and again, I did not encounter such ruptures *ab nihilo*, as if from nowhere. Every breach, no matter how eruptive, always takes place in and on a background that has never quite worked itself out, that is, within a scene both already established and yet open to transformations. In *For What Tomorrow ... A Dialogue*, Derrida (2004) likens this intellectual background to an "inheritance," insisting that all thought is possible only insofar as one has inherited concepts, theories, even ways of writing from other thinkers who always already come before and who we, therefore, follow. "It is true," Derrida tells Elizabeth Roudinesco, "whether it's a question of life or work or thought, that I have always recognized myself in the figure of the heir—and more and more so, in a way that is more and more deliberate, and often happy" (3). Derrida was incessantly aware that he was an heir to the works of, for example, predecessors like Nietzsche, Husserl, Hegel, and (most of all) Heidegger, but also to contemporaries such as Foucault, Deleuze, Barthes, and others (Derrida 2001). As original as Derrida's thought might have been, it only made sense against the background of these others. Recognizing oneself as an heir in work, thought, and life entails an acknowledgement of one's place within a heritage and along a lineage.

It entails a destabilization of the myths of unity and genius often circulating around the figure of the critic, for the critic is always working after, and thus following, others—human and more-than-human alike (Derrida 2008). From a methodological perspective, the point is to recognize that we are all in some significant sense heirs to intellectual and practical traditions not of our own choosing.

Although it would be impossible to comprehensively enumerate every intellectual inheritance that has impacted my own modes of proceeding (there are some, no doubt, about which even I am unaware), I nevertheless want to highlight some of the key influences that have shaped my treatment of the issues animating *Mortal Assemblages.* I am an heir, first of all, to the rhetorical tradition as it has been taken up and transformed by thinkers like Michael Calvin McGee, Barbara Ann Biesecker, and Kevin Michael DeLuca, each of whom has created concepts of rhetoric that attempt to explain how symbolic action changes the world. From McGee (1980a; 1980b; 1990), I have inherited the idea that our task as rhetorical scholars is to trace the movement of the social by locating textual fragments that demonstrate shifts in thinking and action. McGee implored rhetorical scholars to find evidence for their claims that particular texts have force in the world. From Biesecker (1989; 1992b), I have received the Derridean and Foucaultian gifts of a doubled wariness—on the one hand, a skepticism of efforts to recover origins and, on the other hand, an avoidance of placing rhetoric in the service of a transparent, teleological path towards something called Progress. And from DeLuca (1999a; 1999b), I have received three enduring gifts: first, an ontological understanding of rhetoric; second, an appreciation of the ways in which media impact on audience's encounters, interpretations, and responses to rhetoric; and, third, a willingness to see that

moralism and criticism can and ought to be kept separate, at least for a while. Rhetorics mediate the world in all sorts of ways, DeLuca contends, and the rhetorical scholar's task is to understand *how* those rhetorics are functioning without subjecting them first to a test of morality. My approach to rhetoric is deeply indebted to these thinkers who, on the whole, have showed me how to treat textual fragments not merely as more or less accurate re-presentations of social relations but, more significantly, as immanent forces in contingent and always unraveling worlds composed of human and more-than-human actants struggling for coexistence.

I am heir as well to works by a growing and interdisciplinary assemblage of scholars concerned with the ways in which rhetorics mediate manifold forms of ecological relationality. I have experienced texts by too many thinkers to name—though the writings of Edward Abbey (1968), David Abram (1996), Stacy Alaimo (2010), Jane Bennett (2010), Robert Bullard (1993), Judith Butler (2004; 2009) Donal Carbaugh (1999), Mel Chen (2012), William Cronon (1996), Kevin DeLuca (1999b; 1999c; 2001; 2005; 2007), Danielle Endres (2013), Neil Evernden (1992), Donna Haraway (1990; 2008), Debra Hawhee (2011), Nathan Hodges (2015), Aldo Leopold (1949), Lynn Margulis (1998), Doreen Massey (2005), Carolyn Merchant (1983), Timothy Morton (2007; 2010), Jennifer Peeples (2011; 2013), Phaedra Pezzullo (2007), Val Plumwood (1999), Richard Rogers (1998), Julie "Madrone" Schutten (2008), Natasha Seegert (2014), Michel Serres (1995; 2011), Gary Snyder (1969), and Walt Whitman (1855) have had too strong an impact to go unnamed—as gifts for my own thinking so that it is now difficult to parse the individual effects these texts have had on my thought. Nevertheless, the collective impact of this vast inheritance has been a more insistent and nuanced

appreciation throughout my own scholarship of the forms of interconnection and interdependency that link human and more-than-human actants in webs of relation and responsibility. Not only do these thinkers teach us that humans are deeply and inextricably intertwined with what is not human, but they also insist on the mediating force that rhetorics have on these complex relationships. They demonstrate how symbolic action impacts upon our understandings and experiences of our earthly cohabitants and of the so-called natural world.

Significantly, this inheritance includes a somewhat transgressive concept of the human, which foregrounds corporeality rather than cognition as the primary, even primordial, force shaping what it means to be human. Historically, philosophers have tended to privilege the mind over the body, often equating what is distinctly human with our capacity for thought.[1] In contrast with these prevailing views, I have inherited a way of thinking that focuses on and even privileges the body as the foundational aspect of what it means to be human. As such, in my work I ask not what makes humans different from or better than but, rather, what connects us to the more-than-human actants with which we incessantly and unwittingly interact. Thus, I am less interested in analysis (taking apart) than in synthesis (bringing together). On this point, I take cues from

[1] Standard interpretations of several major philosophical projects tend to find that thinkers as wide-ranging as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant have privileged the mind over the body in their conceptualizations of human being. In some significant sense Plato's foundational distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds set this series of analyses into motion. Aristotle also defined humans as the "rational animal," arguing that what *sets humans apart* from other living beings is a capacity for rational activity that exceeds the nutritive and instinctual drives of plants and other animals. René Descartes, for his part, reified this view of humanity by contending that the mind and the body are really distinct from one another and that, properly speaking, it is the mind that defines what it means to be human. And Immanuel Kant's notion of the *a priori* forms motivating mind and body holds that forces exterior to the phenomenal world impinge upon normal existence.

thinkers like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, and Stacy Alaimo, each of whom has developed theories of the human that are more about embodied entanglement than they are about distinguishing different kinds of bodies from one another. Alaimo (2010), for instance, put forth the notion of "trans-corporeality" to designate forms of relationality that bind human and more-than-human. Over and against capacities for cognition and rationality, Alaimo's view of the human takes into consideration the multiple relations that establish the human at a material level. Throughout my work, I take seriously the forms of relationality that establish, sustain, and threaten the human, as well as the ways in which rhetorics mediate those relationships (e.g., Barnett 2015; 2016; 2017). What constitutes the human cannot be taken for granted but must, rather, be constantly situated within the shifting material-symbolic assemblages that compose it.

Much of the work that I have just mentioned is indebted implicitly or explicitly to the eruptive force of poststructuralism. In particular, the work of Derrida animates a great deal of contemporary thought about the entanglement of human and more-than-human actants. Derrida's thought also plays across *Mortal Assemblages*, sometimes openly but more often implicitly. Throughout his *oeuvre*, Derrida routinely muddles the boundary between inside and outside as a means of demonstrating how the presumed purity of one element (for example, the human) is predicated on its having always already been contaminated by others. In discussing the subject, for instance, Derrida (1982, 134) writes that, "Man, since always, is his proper end, that is, the end of his proper. Being, since always, is its proper end, that is, the end of its proper." In this somewhat quizzical pair of sentences, Derrida underlines the extent to which "Man," or the subject of modernity, is irreducibly in touch with what is outside itself. The subject is not self-enclosed, but is

radically open to the world. Indeed, the subject cannot take shape without what is outside itself, that is, with its "end" understood as a kind of permeable boundary. Derrida routinely demonstrates how the seeming purity of the human depends upon a more fundamental contamination. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, a text largely responsible for the development of the field of critical animal studies, Derrida (2008) more explicitly argues for a view of the human as enmeshed in ecological networks and, indeed, as always "following" the more-than-human animals that much of philosophy has excluded. By figuring the human as both constitutively exposed to what is not human and as part of a lineage that includes nonhuman animals, Derrida lays an important foundation for the work of this dissertation. Following Derrida, I take seriously the ways in which the human is always already enmeshed in ecosystems and how this fundamental entanglement opens onto significant transformations in modes of ecological inhabitance and earthly coexistence.

There are no doubt other inheritances that could be mentioned here. Certainly, other theoretical lineages and commitments will become evident throughout the following pages. In recognizing myself in "the figure of the heir," however, have I not relinquished control over "my own" text, given it over (or given it back) to those who came before me? Just the opposite, rather. I give it over to those who will, I hope, come after, who will follow this text and who will make something of/with it. This dissertation, like all other texts, *disseminates* (Barthes 1977; Derrida 1981). It scatters without guaranteeing. As soon as I write it, I have already lost control. To write is to be always in the process of giving up and giving over certain kinds of power to others whom one cannot control. This is why Derrida (as well as Barthes, for that matter) routinely likens

writing to death (e.g., Derrida 2007). “Only a finite being,” Derrida writes, “inherits, and his finitude *obliges* him. It obliges him to receive what is larger and older and more powerful and more durable than he. But the same obliges one to choose, to prefer, to sacrifice, to exclude, to let go and leave behind” (2004, 5). This sense of obligation, to be simultaneously faithful to one’s masters and to push them to their limits, *to be faithful to a certain infidelity*, emerges again in my relationships with various rhetorical fragments, a set of relationships to which I now turn.

Rhetorics: Openings for Extrapolation

Throughout *Mortal Assemblages* I work on and with dozens of rhetorical fragments drawn from an emergent movement towards more ecological deathcare practices. These fragments, I argue, are not only contributing to a shift away from some of the environmentally damaging forms of interment described in Chapter One but they are also transforming the way that we think about what it means to be human and to be enmeshed in ecosystems at the beginning of the 21st century. Without these rhetorical fragments—among them websites, documentaries, images, news stories, YouTube videos, books, works of history, philosophy, and poetry, as well as bodily practices of various sorts—this dissertation could not exist. These rhetorical practices and objects are no less than the ruptures that gave rise to this project in the first place, and they are the conditions of possibility for my own thinking about the radical transformations currently underway not only in the modern deathcare industry but also in our collective understandings of ecology and of humanity, of the inextricable forms of interconnectivity and interdependency of which we all are inextricably a part. Hence, I want to explain

here both how I think about and treat the rhetorical fragments that animate this project.

Over and against the colloquial sense in which rhetoric is routinely framed—typically as "mere" rhetoric or as a degraded form of public discourse not totally distinct from propaganda—I treat rhetoric as an ontological force in the world. By this I mean that rhetoric is not limited in scope or function to simply re-presenting social relations in more or less accurate terms (though it certainly also does this). Rather, rhetorics compose, decompose, and recompose social relations in real time. Rhetoric, as DeLuca defines it, is "the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures" (1999a, 346). According to this definition, rhetorics play a crucial role in the production and maintenance of social relations: rhetorics "articulate" (or link together) multiple elements into something that occasionally congeals into a temporary form of reality. Social realities, DeLuca suggests, can take the form of a felt sense of identity (insofar as an "I" is brought into existence by particular rhetorics); of a politically charged association and outlook, that is, of an ideology; or even of a kind of consciousness, a way of thinking about one's relation to the world. I am particularly interested in this dissertation with the impacts that rhetorics might have on ways of thinking about the relationships among human and more-than-human actants in complex and shifting ecosystems.

Embedded within DeLuca's (1999a) concept of rhetoric is a notion of consciousness that radically departs from more commonsense understandings of that term, which tend to locate consciousness in the psyche of an individual person. In numerous of his texts, Derrida compellingly challenged this conceptualization of consciousness on the grounds that it relies on a troubled notion of presence. Especially

within *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida (1973) demonstrates how something like consciousness is an effect of a more general form of writing, which means that consciousness emerges not from within an individual but, rather, from the outside. For example, Derrida begins by recounting that for Edmund Husserl consciousness manifests in the so-called "phenomenological voice," or the purely internal dialogue one has with oneself. In the Husserlian version, one is conscious insofar as one is present to oneself in the act of speaking to oneself, or carrying on a conversation with oneself that remains entirely interior. Thus, consciousness as self-presence takes the form of an inner soliloquy. Yet, as Derrida contends, there is a serious problem with Husserl's theory of consciousness. The language in which one speaks to oneself comes from elsewhere. Thus, the phenomenological voice is always already conditioned (or contaminated) by a language not of one's own creation; one can only speak to oneself in a voice that is legible because it is conventional, intelligible because it is socially shared. The outside (the system of language) has therefore always already penetrated the inside, which means that the inside (consciousness, self-presence) is only possible because of what exceeds it. Consciousness, then, is the effect rather than the cause of social realities produced and sustained by publicly circulating rhetorics.

Since consciousness emerges not out of an isolated or solipsistic "I" that predates rhetoric but out of rhetoric itself, students of rhetoric are uniquely positioned to trace shifts in consciousness. Decentered from individual psyches and distributed throughout the social, evidence of various consciousnesses can be found in texts. Writing on the heels of the significant social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the Civil Rights, women's, and environmental movements key among them—McGee advised rhetorical

scholars to trace the movement of the social (as opposed to studying "social movements") by locating in publicly disseminating textual fragments evidence that thinking has changed or is in the process of changing. Imploring scholars to see social movement as intimately intertwined with consciousness, McGee (1980a) wrote:

> "Social movement" ought not to be a *premise* with which we *begin* research, defining what we want to see and, lo and behold, finding it. Rather, "social movement" ought to be a *conclusion*, a carefully considered and well-argued inference that changes in human consciousness are of such a nature that "social movement" has occurred, or that the rhetorical activity of a group of human beings would produce "social movement" if it were effective. Theoretical descriptions of "social movement(s)," in other words, ought to make questions of consciousness "come first," focusing on the fact of collectivity and not on the accident of an allegedly pre-existing phenomenon. (244)

If social movement is not a starting point for research, the burden of proof is in some significant sense in the hands of scholars who are in a position to trace whether and how social movement is or is not occurring (see also Latour 2007). McGee includes a clause in this injunction which is important for rhetoricians: not only can we infer that changes in consciousness have taken place by studying texts but we can also speculate about when "the rhetorical activity of a group of human beings *would produce 'social movement' if it were effective*" (244, emphasis mine). That is, it is sometimes the case that one can reasonably demonstrate that consciousness has, indeed, shifted. At other times, doing so is a much more difficult or even impossible task. Especially in the case of emergent rhetorics, scholars may be limited to showing how consciousness would likely shift if the assumptions and practices embedded within particular forms of rhetorical activity were taken up and adopted by audiences. In any case, it is both actual and potential changes in consciousness regarding the relationships among death, ecology, and the human which concern me throughout this dissertation.

In order to track changes in consciousness, throughout *Mortal Assemblages* I grapple with dozens of rhetorical texts and practices. Not only are ways of thinking sometimes explicitly articulated in language, but they are also embedded within entrenched and emergent modes of bodily comportment. Hence, I read everything from promotional videos to bodily performances as rhetorical practices which offer clues into the contours of shifting social consciousnesses. Following McGee, I have assembled a diverse array of rhetorical fragments together in order to support two kinds of claims. On the one hand, in the case of more established practices like conservation burial, I have selected examples of rhetoric that show demonstrable changes in thinking about the human and ecological relationality. Given that conservation burial has now been available in the United States since 1998, I aim to explain some of the ways in which consciousness has shifted in the wake of its popularization. On the other hand, in the case of more emergent practices such as human composting, I have had to work in a more speculative mode with texts and practices that suggest but cannot confirm that social consciousness has occurred. In this case, I flesh out some of the ways in which thinking *might shift* should rhetorics of human decomposition become effective by unpacking the underlying assumptions about death, ecology, and humanity that animate efforts like the Urban Death Project. By assembling multiple fragments together, and reading them alongside and against one another *a la* McGee (1990), I am not only able to provide readers with a sense of how ideas like conservation burial, human composting, and human edibility are disseminating across contexts but I am also able to better account for the force that these rhetorics are having or might have on social relations.

Thus, the rhetorical texts and practices that I grapple with throughout the central

chapters of this dissertation are openings for what we might call, following Steven Shaviro (2016), "extrapolation." I prefer the term extrapolation to alternatives such as criticism, interpretation, and analysis since "extrapolation" focuses our attention on the possibilities of inference that mark every encounter with rhetorics. Unlike criticism, extrapolation does not set out with a predetermined moral objective in mind and then subject texts to its moralizing gaze. Unlike interpretation, extrapolation does not seek simply to offer up a creative, inventive reading of texts. And unlike analysis, extrapolation does not proceed by way of slicing texts up into smaller, and thus more manageable, pieces of discourse.

Rather, extrapolation sets out from the specificity of given texts and practices and then radiates outward to articulate connections among multiple fragments and to build up a more robust understanding of how rhetorics are impinging upon social relations. "We must begin," writes Derrida, "*wherever we are* [...] *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (1976, 162). Proceeding from those texts and practices that disrupt our ways of thinking about the world, extrapolation dwells in the openings these ruptures produce but also, and importantly, follows their fissures as they move outward from the initial scene of encounter. Indeed, the fissures become indications of shifts in consciousness that exceed the merely eccentric or local. A rupture is only a rupture if it is felt in more than one place by more than one person, that is, if it exerts force by causing damage. Eruptive rhetorics do a kind of violence to taken-for-granted truths (e.g., Abel 1999). Fissures in the ground of the taken for granted are a means of sizing up that damage, of tracing the force of rhetorics as they shift ways of thinking about and inhabiting the world. Working by extrapolation is a means of moving from

moments of intense rupture through to the residual impacts that take shape as rhetorics break with and move across contexts. It is also a means of beginning with something small—say, an image of mushrooms consuming a human corpse—and working through (inferring) what that might mean and do in the world as it shifts from the virtual to the actual as an emergent practice of everyday life.

Assemblages: Causes for Conceptual Creation

As a mode of proceeding, extrapolation leads to conceptual creation. Concepts are the contingent products of extrapolation: they are the most extreme form of inference, a leap of faith from the smallness of a case to the bigness of practices and processes that cannot be easily apprehended. As such, the concepts presented throughout the chapters that follow—key among them are *rhetorics of dispersal*, *decompositional rhetorics*, and *rhetorical digestion*—are my own attempts to explain how different rhetorical texts and practices are working in the world. Concepts, according to Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, 5), "are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created and would be nothing without their creator's signature." Drawing on the work of Nietzsche (1968), who argued in *The Will to Power* that philosophers must not take others' concepts for granted but create concepts of their own, Deleuze and Guattari call on scholars (and particularly philosophers) to engage in the difficult but rewarding work of creating concepts:

> The concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come. Concepts in this sense belong to philosophy by right, because it is philosophy that creates them and never stops creating them. The concept is obviously knowledge—but knowledge of itself, and what it knows is the pure event, which must not be confused with the state of affairs in which it is embodied. The task of philosophy when it creates concepts, entities, is

> always to extract an event from things and beings, to set up the new event from things and beings, always to give them a new event: space, time, matter, thought, the possible as events. (32-33)

Conceptual creation is the productive element of rhetorical scholarship. Creating concepts from the materials of the world is a way of making the world in new ways, of composing new forms of relationality. In this sense, conceptual creation challenges the lauded place of moralism and condemnation within critical rhetorical studies. Concepts are useful not because they tell us how to live our lives or how to pass judgment, but, on the contrary, because they help us make sense of how rhetorics are working in the world. Moreover, the concepts we create as scholars also become forces in the world.[2]

Hence, I create concepts because they help me to understand how different rhetorics function and with what consequences they disseminate across contexts. The concepts I create in the following pages are condensations of years of thought and intellectual experimentation. These concepts are simultaneously subjective and objective. On the one hand, every concept is created by someone, a specific intellectual working on and with a particular set of problems and artifacts. Every concept is signed by its creator and remains tethered to its source in this way. On the other hand, concepts are objective in the sense that they are created with elements taken from the world, not created out of thin air. Concepts are always down to earth. Made from and for the earth, concepts

---

[2] Not every concept can change the world. But some do. As one recent example, Judith Butler's (1990) writings on the performativity of gender have widely shaped discussions of gender and sexuality across the past two-and-a-half decades. The idea that gender is not an immutable, essential, unchanging element of personal identity is more or less accepted by many groups today. In *New York Magazine*, for instance, Molly Fischer (2016) wonders, "What sage could have predicted that *heteronormativity* would eventually make its way into the vocabulary of teen magazines and shareable web content? Only, perhaps, the queer theorist Judith Butler." Butler's work anticipated the popular deconstruction of gender by inaugurating the conceptual maneuvers necessary for such transformations.

account for and are accountable to cohabitants making ways of coexistence. Creating concepts is related to cultivating knowledge:

> you will know nothing through concepts unless you have first created them—that is, constructed them in an intuition specific to them: a field, a plane, and a ground that must not be confused with them but that shelters their seeds and the personae who cultivate them. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 7)

Creating concepts is about understanding things on their own terms, about giving theoretical shape to complex processes that evade simple explanations. Yet, concepts also create paths for response. "All concepts," Deleuze and Guattari write, "are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges" (16). The concepts I create are offered, then, not only as supplements for thinking about and understanding the world but also as provocations for inhabiting it differently.

Most of the concepts I create in this dissertation are responses to emergent assemblages that are generating relationships among death, ecology, and what it means to be human. Human deaths in the United States are always scenes of assembly which bring together bodies of several sorts; material contraptions and technologies; places and geologic/atmospheric forces; laws and mores; myths, narratives, and cultural lore; corporations and capitalism. Rhetorics cut across and invade all elements of assemblages, giving shape, meaning, and force to the contingent relationships among the multiple elements composing an assemblage. Thus, accounting for death is also always accounting for strange forms of assemblage. Death does not isolate but, rather, brings together. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 71) write that, "an assemblage is necessary for organisms to be caught within and permeated by a social field that utilizes

them." That is, the field of the social is itself always already an assemblage of multiplicities: "I" is already "we," one is always many. When one element in the assemblage shifts, all other elements are impacted. When, for example, one technological implement is substituted for another or when one way of framing death replaces another, the whole assemblage becomes something different. Throughout *Mortal Assemblages* I create concepts to explain the emergent assemblages taking shape in the wake of radical transformations in deathcare practices. I focus on the rhetorical dimensions of these assemblages as a way of making sense of how those new assemblages might be understood.

Creating concepts is a means of condensing multiple elements of an assemblage into something sensible, of giving shape in writing to relationships that pass under our usual modes of human perception. "There are no simple concepts," Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 15) write, and this is so because every concept, like the assemblages they approximate, are composed of multiplicities. Indeed, "each concept will therefore be considered as the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components" (20). Concepts are themselves assemblages; they are comings-together, syntheses of heterogeneous but necessary elements. Creating concepts, then, is a mode of composing: a productive activity defined by its relation to the available, to the materials that are accessible and with which one can work. As it is practiced here, conceptual creation is a way of moving beyond textual extrapolation to account for the assemblages that rhetorics help to produce and sustain.

A Note To Readers

I began this chapter with a sentence taken from Nietzsche's (1999) provocative, posthumously published essay "On Truth and Lying in Nonmoral Sense." In that prescient essay, Nietzsche contends that what we call "truth" is in fact dependent on a concatenation of lies, falsehoods, and acts of deception. Truths are indistinguishable from lies because, as Nietzsche argues, every word is itself an illusion, a metaphor that we have mistaken for truth. Since this is the case, the "drive to truth" implicit in philosophy and in scholarship more generally begins to look somewhat dubious. If our objects of study are only arbitrarily related to truth, then our studies of material-symbolic texts and practices also correspond to truths only in an arbitrary way. By acknowledging that our objects of inquiry make the world rather than reflect it, that they compose truths rather than index them, we must also admit that our work, the texts that we write, also help to produce the world.

Since *Mortal Assemblages* is, like the texts and practices I discuss throughout these pages, a productive intervention in the world, the practices of textual extrapolation and conceptual creation undertaken throughout this project do not lend themselves in any simple way to tests of veracity. While I have done my best to exercise a form of fidelity to the texts and practices I have studied, I no doubt have occasionally strayed in order to make sense of what these texts are doing in the world and how. The rhetorical force of these textual fragments will only be apprehended in retrospect: the game is too early to call. What I am able to offer here, then, is not an exhaustive account of the rhetoric of ecological deathcare but, rather, a series of provocations for thinking about the relationships that accrue among rhetoric, death, and ecology. These provocations emerge

out of intimate encounters with densely woven rhetorical acts; they are rooted in texts and practices which have force in the world.

While I am too convinced by Derrida's (1981) argument about the impossibility of securing a meaning or outcome to suggest that readers will find this text satisfying, I hope that the reader will approach this text along the lines laid out by Brian Massumi (1987, xv) in his "Translator's Forward" to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*: "The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?" By evacuating the question "is it true?" I hope that readers will be free to think with the concepts mobilized throughout *Mortal Assemblages*.[3] If this project makes it possible to think and feel the world anew, even if only slightly, then it will have been a "success." If it does not make these things possible for you, worry little and toss it onto the compost pile.

[3] In their discussion of Descartes' concepts, Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 27) write that, "There is no point in wondering whether Descartes was right or wrong. Are implicit and subjective presuppositions more valid than explicit objective presuppositions? Is it necessary 'to begin,' and, if so, is it necessary to start from the point of view of a subjective certainty? Can thought as such be the verb of an I? There is no direct answer. Cartesian concepts can only be assessed as a function of their problems and their plane." Put differently, Descartes' work must be assessed not in terms of its veracity but, rather, as a specific response to a set of problems that confronted Descartes. The question is what Descartes' concepts made possible in relation to those problems, namely, the problems of cognition, knowledge, and subject-object relations.

Works Cited

Abbey, Edward. 1968. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Abel, Marco. 1999. "*Fargo*: The Violent Production of the Masochistic Contract as a Cinematic Concept." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16: 308–28.

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Barnett, Joshua Trey. 2015. "Toxic Portraits: Resisting Multiple Invisibilities in the Environmental Justice Movement." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2): 405–25.

———. 2016. "Politics of Edibility: Reconceptualizing Ecological Relationality." *Environmental Communication*, 1–14.

———. 2017. "Impurities: Thinking Ecologically With *Safe*." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10: Forthcoming.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. "From Work to Text." In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, 155–64. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Biesecker, Barbara. 1989. "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of Différance." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22 (2): 110–30.

———. 1992a. "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25 (2): 140–61.

———. 1992b. "Michel Foucault and the Question of Rhetoric." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25 (4): 351–64.

Bullard, Robert D., ed. 1993. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*. Boston: South End Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

———. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Carbaugh, Donal. 1999. "'Just Listen': 'Listening' and Landscape Among the Blackfeet." *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (3): 250–70.

Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cloud, Dana. 1994. "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric." *Western Journal of Communication* 58: 141–63.

Cronon, William. 1996. "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69–90. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 1999a. "Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32 (4): 334–48.

———. 1999b. *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

———. 1999c. "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (1): 9–21.

———. 2001. "Trains in the Wilderness: The Corporate Roots of Environmentalism." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4 (4): 633–52.

———. 2005. "Thinking with Heidegger: Rethinking Environmental Theory and Practice." *Ethics & the Environment* 10 (1): 67–87.

———. 2007. "A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans." In *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*, edited by Ronald Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, 27–55. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena*. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

———. 1981. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

———. 2001. *The Work of Mourning*. Translated by Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2007. *Learning to Live Finally*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Brooklyn: Melville House.

———. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, and Elizabeth Roudinesco. 2004. *For What Tomorrow ... A Dialogue*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Endres, Danielle. 2013. "Animist Intersubjectivity as Argumentation: Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute Arguments Against a Nuclear Waste Site at Yucca Mountain." *Argumentation* 27 (2): 183–200.

Evernden, Neil. 1992. *The Social Creation of Nature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Finnegan, Cara A. 2008. "Doing Rhetorical History of the Visual: The Photograph and the Archive." In *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, edited by Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, 195–214. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fischer, Molly. 2016. "Think Gender Is Performance? You Have Judith Butler to Thank for That." *New York Magazine*, June 13. http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/06/judith-butler-c-v-r.html.

Friedman, Sharon M., Carole M. Gorney, and Brenda P. Egolf. 1987. "Reporting on Radiation: A Content Analysis of Chernobyl Coverage." *Journal of Communication* 37 (3): 58–67.

Haraway, Donna. 1990. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

———. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hariman, Robert, and John Louis Lucaites. 2007. *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hawhee, Debra. 2011. "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44 (1): 81–87.

Hodges, Nathan. 2015. “The Chemical Life.” *Health Communication* 30: 627–34.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lee, Jae Rhim. 2011. *My Mushroom Burial Suit*. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/jae_rhim_lee.

Leff, Michael, and Andrew Sachs. 1990. “Words the Most Like Things: Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text.” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (3): 252–73.

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Margulis, Lynn. 1998. *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. New York: Basic Books.

Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications.

Massumi, Brian. 1987. “Translator’s Forward: Pleasures of Philosophy.” In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ix – xix. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McGee, Michael Calvin. 1980a. “‘Social Movement’: Phenomenon or Meaning?” *Central States Speech Journal* 31: 233–44.

———. 1980b. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1): 1–16.

———. 1990. “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture.” *Western Journal of Communication* 54 (3): 274–89.

Merchant, Carolyn. 1983. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne.

“Method, N.” 2016. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed November 25. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/view/Entry/117560.

Middleton, Michael K., Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres. 2011. “Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions.” *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (4): 386–406.

Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

———. 1999. "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense." In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, 141–53. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Peeples, Jennifer. 2011. "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes." *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5 (4): 373–92.

———. 2013. "Imaging Toxins." *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 7 (2): 191–210.

Pezzullo, Phaedra C. 2007. *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Plumwood, Val. 1999. "Being Prey." In *The New Earth Reader: The Best of Terra Nova*, edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus. 76-91: MIT Press.

Rogers, Richard A. 1998. "Overcoming the Objectification of Nature in Constitutive Theories: Toward a Transhuman, Materialist Theory of Communication." *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (3): 244–72.

Schutten, Julie Kalil. 2008. "Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter." *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 2 (2): 193–211.

Seegert, Natasha. 2014. "Play of Sniffication: Coyotes Sing in the Margins." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47 (2): 158–78.

Serres, Michel. 1995. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

———. 2011. *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* Translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Shaviro, Steven. 2016. *Discognition*. London: Repeater Books.

Snyder, Gary. 1969. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions.

Spinoza, Baruch. 2005. *Political Treatise*. Translated by R.H.M. Ewles. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Whitman, Walt. 1855. *Song of Myself*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

CHAPTER THREE

DISPERSAL: CONSERVATION VIA CARNAL CLAIMS

One's death should mean something. One should try to
have a good death, just as one tries to have a good life.

— Edward Abbey with Jack Loeffler (1989, 18)

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

— Walt Whitman (1855, 54), "Song of Myself"

Along the banks of a meandering mountain stream in the hills and valleys near Westminster, South Carolina, sits Ramsey Creek Preserve. Scattered throughout old-growth forest, sheltered by abundant yellow and short-leaf pine, eastern hemlock, river alder, sedge, and other native flora, concealed by brown, decaying leaves and a thick layer of rich, pungent humus, and in ear shot of the nearby creek rambling over rock shoals, are the mostly unmarked graves of human beings who, for one reason or another, have been lowered into the South Carolina soil without the trappings of a "conventional" burial. Embalming fluids are not permitted at the Preserve, the first "natural" burial ground established in the United States, and caskets (if used at all) must be composed of biodegradable materials like wood or cardboard. You will find neither concrete vault nor elaborate headstone here, yet small, flat rocks taken from the area, engraved with names,

dates, and epitaphs appear to the discerning eye. Describing the Preserve, Mark Harris (2007, 160) writes, “its grounds are so natural, so free of the usual funereal structures that you could wander into it by chance on an afternoon hike through these hills and never even know you’ve strayed into a graveyard.” Dirt trails wind through these dense woods, delivering pedestrians not only to where the bodies of friends, family, and strangers have been reunited with the damp, animate earth but also to scenes and sites where the living might sit and reflect, watch for birds, coyotes, and even the occasional black bear, where they might enjoy the sights and sounds of the stream, study the hundreds of species of flowers and plants that grow wild on the Preserve’s grounds, pick a spot where they or someone they know could one day be buried, or watch as a corpse is covered with dirt.

Established in 1998 by Dr. William “Billy” Campbell and Kimberley Campbell, Ramsey Creek Preserve was the first conservation burial ground of its kind in the United States, thus setting the standard for other “green” burial operations throughout the country. Confronted with the death of his father, Billy found himself uncomfortable with the American funeral industry (Harris 2007). Channeling his frustrations with Big Funeral in what he thought was a productive direction, he turned toward “his dream of conservation burial” (“Bios” 2016), which he had cultivated while still in medical school. Since Ramsey Creek opened for business, about 300 other certified providers of “green burials” throughout North America have followed its lead (“Find a Provider” 2016). The Green Burial Council’s list of standards are based on the practices that take place at Ramsey Creek, making it not only a leader in conservation burial but also placing it on the cutting edge of an emergent movement towards ecological deathcare practices. What sets Ramsey Creek apart from most conventional and even green burial grounds,

however, is its commitment to long-term conservation and ecological biodiversity. When the Preserve opened it comprised 33 acres and a quarter mile of Ramsey Creek frontage; in 2006, the protected area expanded to include an additional 38 acres upstream ("About" 2016). The Green Burial Council, of which the Preserve is a key member, has plans to conserve millions of acres by designating them as burial grounds.

At Ramsey Creek, not only are corpses buried without formaldehyde and heavy caskets, thus eliminating much of the ecological burden of conventional burials, but the buried bodies also ensure that the land will be indefinitely free from development. The Preserve collaborated with Upstate Forever, a conservation organization that works with private land owners to protect South Carolina's Upstate area, to create a conservation agreement in 2006 that permanently restricts the kinds of activities and development that can take place on the land ("Ramsey Creek Preserve" 2014). And, in many states, there are already established laws governing how burial grounds can and cannot be put to use for other purposes. In general, it is difficult to repurpose lands that have historically been used for interring human bodies. Throughout its nearly 20 years of existence, Ramsey Creek has facilitated the natural burials of more than 100 people, a practice that helps ensure that its 71-acre slice of upstate South Carolina will not become a site of future development.

Unsurprisingly, the owners of Ramsey Creek Preserve and advocates of conservation burial tout this model of land conservation as a beacon of pragmatic ecological stewardship. As Billy Campbell (2013) said in a TED Talk entitled "Saving One Million Acres for Two Thousand Years," the ultimate goal of places like the Preserve is not to protect just a few parcels of property here and there but to shield

several million acres of land from future development. Citing Aldo Leopold's (1949) "land ethic," Campbell argued that conservation practices ought to be both holistic and reciprocal. Humans, he suggested, must do more than reap the rewards of undeveloped land; we must also be willing to give our bodies over to the land as a form of sustenance. Indeed, Campbell suggested that we conceive of our flesh as a gift to the earth, a parting present to the world that sustained our bodies in life. This language of the gift resonates with Walt Whitman's (1855, 54) "Song of Myself," where he wrote, "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love." In Whitman's as in Campbell's words, giving one's body to the earth is positioned as a means of giving back to the land-community a portion of what one has received. Within the logic of conservation burial outlined by Campbell, the human body becomes a material-symbolic apparatus for securing the land ethic, for ensuring that ecosystems will be kept intact. Bequeathed as a gift to the land, buried in the earth without the toxic and resource-intensive accouterments of conventional burial, the human body disperses throughout the ecosystem, making it possible to protect the place from residential, commercial, and industrial encroachment into perpetuity.

Practices of conservation burial, I suggest throughout this chapter, exert force through a counter-hegemonic *rhetoric of bodily dispersal*. Against the backdrop of continued industrialization and sprawling development, as well as the historical and contemporary practices of the mainstream funeral industry, conservation burial offers a significantly alternative means of both interment and land conservation. Moreover, in contrast with the "American way of death" lamented by Jessica Mitford (2000), conservation burial marshals arguments about the sanctity of the human body not to

perpetuate a myth of bodily autonomy and control but to radically decompose the prevailing sense of the human subject as a self-contained, coherent, bounded, and privileged kind of being. Indeed, the practice of conservation burial subverts the logic of anthropocentric interment by refiguring the human body as not itself something to be permanently protected but, on the contrary, as a means of securing ecological stability over and against any particular human's desires for bodily preservation. Instead, it is precisely a *lack of corporeal coherency* (via bodily dispersal) upon which conservation burial's force depends.

As a form of body rhetoric, conservation burial works through *dispersal*. In contrast to the prevailing discourse of "disposal" common among deathcare practitioners and scholars, the notion of "dispersal" acknowledges the processual and fragmenting force of ecological death practices. Whereas disposal connotes a kind of final disposition, dispersal suggests an ongoing activity, something unfolding long after the body is buried. Dispersal, as deathcare scholars Hannah Rumble, John Troyer, Tony Walter, and Kate Woodthorpe (2014, 253) argue, "celebrates kinship with the natural world" by underlining the ways in which human bodies can, under the right circumstances, actually provide sustenance for other actors within the ecosystem. When materialized in burial practices, dispersal entails the physical decomposition and mobilization of the human body. As the body loses its form and becomes otherwise, its fragments are taken up and moved throughout the ecosystem by various kinds of actors. In this sense, the human body diffuses and infuses the land-community. Over time, the process of dispersal becomes so thorough that it no longer makes sense to talk about *the human body*, but, rather, about the biotic assemblages in which it has been variously incorporated. This is,

in fact, the function of conservation burial: through dispersal the human body loses its seemingly singular form and becomes more fully integrated into the ecosystem where it can not only materially nourish other beings but symbolically and legally make a claim on the land.

To put it differently, conservation burial is a certain way of writing on the land, a process of disseminating traces that promise but cannot guarantee conservation. In Derrida's (1976, 158) somewhat enigmatic words, "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (emphasis in original). Conservation burial figures the land itself as a textual weave upon and through which traces might be added like so many supplemental threads. The porous earth waits not only to be read, to be interpreted by wanderers, but to be written upon, to be inscribed. Certainly, as Michel Serres (1995; 2011) forcefully argues, many modes of marking the land (demarcating lines of property and power) do more damage than good: they appropriate in the style of the parasite by taking without reserve (Serres 2007). Yet, not all modes of inscription necessarily appropriate via depreciation. Conservation burial puts forth another option, a way of writing the land that adds to rather than subtracts from ecological stability and biodiversity. The human body, fragmented and decaying, becomes a medium of dispersal, furrowing pathways through the ecosystem as bits of organic matter pass from decomposing corpses throughout the land-community, traversing the boundaries of other kinds of beings. Dispersal, then, is a play of absence and presence in which the human body itself decomposes and becomes otherwise. Bodily traces disseminate, deteriorate, disperse.

In the remainder of Chapter Three, I conceptualize a *rhetoric of dispersal* as one in which the dissemination of bodily traces throughout the land-community works to

secure the stability and sustainability of the ecosystem. Toward that end, I oscillate between acts of textual extrapolation focused on the burial practices at the Preserve *and* conceptual creation surrounding the relationships among human bodies, ecosystems, and rhetoric. Next, I begin to trace the ways in which bodily dispersal is articulated on the Preserve's website, paying particular attention to how the relationship among bodies and broader ecosystems is conceptualized both verbally and visually. Having sampled the practice of bodily dispersal, I then dwell on the performative rhetorical force of the human body. From there, I set my sights on *A Will for the Woods* (Browne et al. 2014), a documentary that tracks the death and burial of one Dr. Clark Wang, a terminally ill physician who chose conservation burial. Along the way, the film intermittently treks through the Preserve and demonstrates the force of bodily dispersal on/in a local ecosystem. Then, I meditate again on the rhetorical force of the human body, this time arguing that bodily dispersal is a mode of writing upon the land in which the disseminating traces of the body disperse through the land-community, suturing the sanctity of the (fragmented) human body to the larger biotic community. Here, I think with Leopold, Serres, and Derrida to suggest that writing the land is a means of transforming the way that humans engage in practices of coexistence (Morton 2010). These practices of writing the land might move us, as Val Plumwood (2008, 75) argues, to "revere the burial place as a site of union with the prior sacred presences of earth rather than as set apart from it [and] honour the dissolution of the human into the more-than-human flux." I close this chapter with a meditation on the "gift." Weaving together Derrida's concept of the gift with representations of conservation burial as a means of bequeathing bodies to the earth, I suggest that the human body's carnal claim to the land

disrupts deep-seated forms of humanism and anthropocentrism by figuring the body itself as radically incoherent, fragmented, and dispersible.

Initial Encounters with Dispersal

Opening Ramsey Creek Preserve's website, one is met with a mélange of white, green, and brown hues, visual resonances of its rural, woodland setting and the burial practices that take place in those South Carolina woods ("Welcome" n.d.). Photographs of the shoals at Ramsey Creek, an unfolding burial service, kids playing in the stream, and a moth flank the site's left and right sides, while a few paragraphs of text inhabit the center of the screen. Rather basic in its layout and simple in its functionality, the site features the usual array of navigation tools, which point the visitor to other pages with titles like "About Us," "Conservation Burial," "F.A.Q.s," "Visit our Photo Gallery," and "Review our Current Price List." Just as Harris (2007) notes that it is difficult on first glance to realize one has entered a graveyard when crossing into Ramsey Creek Preserve, so too with their website. The visitor must read the site, enter into its weave, to get a sense of what takes place on the banks of the mountain stream pictured at the top of this homepage.

The Preserve's homepage begins to articulate the concept of conservation burial to bodily dispersal by referencing the Christian eschatological vision of the body's return to the earth. In the center of the homepage, in a prominent sage green color block, one encounters these perhaps familiar words: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return. – Genesis 3:19." Often shortened to "from dust to dust" or "from ashes to

ashes," this familiar adage conjures a vision of the human body as a temporarily stable entity, one which emerges from and returns to an earthen community. In the sense of embodiment captured by this Biblical passage, dispersal is not optional. It is an eventuality, one that can be neither avoided nor abandoned. Within the context of modern burial practices, which delay decay and forestall a return to the earth, this invocation of the cycles of birth and death, of reincorporation into the earth, forcefully reminds the visitor of their *corpo*reality. Indeed, the image of becoming-dust conjured by this Biblical decree underlines the extent to which the human and the more-than-human are fundamentally and inextricably intertwined: the human makes sense, as David Abram (1996) notes, only in relation to the more-than-human. Dust—that all too malleable and mobile category of particulates—becomes in Genesis and, by extension, on the Preserve's homepage not simply a metaphor but a metonymy for the human body's contingency, precariousness, and dispersibility.

The link between bodily dispersal and conservation is made clearer still as one reads down the website. In the "Welcome" text on the homepage, the Preserve lays out its understanding of what happens at and because of a conservation burial ground. What takes place, the Preserve contends, is first of all a reciprocal exchange between ecological and economic forces. By "harness[ing] the funeral industry," which is to say, by engaging in established market practices through offering products and services to bereaved families, the Preserve is able to protect and restore parcels of land. Challenging the too easy elision of the economic as a means of changing ecological relations for the better, Ramsey Creek articulates a symbiotic relationship between capitalism and conservation. Offering burials enables the land conservation practices because it generates income,

which in turn enables the Preserve to purchase and preserve land. Moreover, this ecological work enables Ramsey Creek to "fund non-profits, education, the arts [sic] and scientific research." The flow of income provided by ecological practices furnishes resources not only for conservation, then, but also for the auxiliary programs that make conservation (burial) both thinkable and doable.

Building on the play of economic and ecological forces central to the Preserve's practice, its website also links conservation burial to ritual and to heritage. The Preserve argues that it is able to "provide a less expensive and more meaningful burial option." While they do not—indeed, cannot—extract themselves from the market, they nonetheless propose another alternative. Integrating ecological work into deathcare practices not only renders burial "less expensive," thus trimming the income stream lining the pockets of funeral industry tycoons, but conservation burial also offers consumers a form of ecological purchasing power, a means of spending their money on something "more meaningful" than heavy coffins and concrete vaults, both of which stave off the inevitable—bodily decay and dispersal within an ecosystem. Hence, the Preserve enthymematically frames itself as "less" economically driven and as "more" ecologically attuned than other kinds of burial operations, a way of tapping into and exploiting an environmental discourse that is largely built upon an oppositional stance vis-à-vis economic calculation.

This link between environmentalism and capitalism is not new (e.g., DeLuca 2001). With conservation burial, however, consumers' money is ostensibly used to secure ecological stability and sustainability. The Preserve frames conservation burial as a form of consumer activism, a means of putting one's money where one's mouth is. As Phaedra

Pezzullo (2011) argues, while consumer activism is not ideal (and it is definitely not "pure"), it is better than nothing and can, in fact, serve as a material force that, over time, shifts the status quo. At Ramsey Creek, a financial investment in conservation burial is positioned against more damaging economic and industrial practices. Within the context of the funeral industry, which is led largely by a few key companies like Service Corporation International (SCI),[1] trading with a small, grassroots outfit functions implicitly as a means of critique. "More than impacting merely the bottom line of corporations through free market capitalism," Pezzullo contends,

> these [consumer-advocacy] campaigns aim to challenge our alienation from material ecological conditions, as well as transform cultural and economic relations between consumers, distributors, producers, and laborers. Although they do not overthrow the logic of free market capitalism, they do have significant impacts. (138)

While we can and should debate what constitutes "significant impacts" when it comes to consumer activism, it is fair to say that consumer choices can effect changes at least on the small scale. Rhetorically, Ramsey Creek locates in conservation burial a means of undermining the hegemony of major funeral corporations by reinstating a hyperlocal, grounded, ecological practice of human interment that attempts to extricate itself from the rapidly expanding international funeral conglomerates such as SCI. It would be easy to charge that the Preserve is only different from the funeral industry by degree, yet this would ignore the material differences produced by different kinds of human interment (Olson 2014).

---

[1] In its 2015 annual report to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Committee, Service Corporation International touted itself as "North America's largest provider of deathcare products and services, with a network of funeral service locations and cemeteries unequaled in geographic scale and reach." Service Corporation International reported revenues of more than $2.9 billion in 2015. It is but one of several companies that dominate the funeral industry in the United States.

Thus, the Preserve renders conservation burial appealing to certain audiences on the grounds that this kind of consumption is actually a means of contributing to practices that might subvert the wheels of progress powered by capitalism. With this in mind, the upshot of conservation burial is rhetorically situated as one of bolstering relationships among humans and the more-than-human world. Rather than distancing humans from ecosystems and from the inevitability of their own decomposition (both things that, arguably, conventional burial accomplishes), Ramsey Creek promises to bridge the divide between humans and the more-than-human world. Indeed, on its homepage the Preserve promises to "foster closer ties between human communities and the natural communities that they depend on." Not only, then, does conservation burial offer an alternative to conventional, resource-intensive and potentially toxic forms of human interment, but it is positioned as a means of coming closer to the "natural" world. Notably, the Preserve does not question the concept of "nature" but relies on its enthymematic plenitude as a means of attracting potential customers with the allure of a deeper connection with the land-community. This connection can be established, of course, by simply visiting the Preserve, walking along its trails, sitting by its stream, taking stock of the native flora and fauna, and by burying one's loved one in the soil on which it sits. These activities offer visitors an opportunity to synesthetically encounter the more-than-human world and, perhaps, to establish a stronger connection with the South Carolina ecosystem.

Though it relies on and reifies a much problematized sense of Nature (e.g., Morton 2007; 2010), the Preserve's website also makes clear that the human and the more-than-human are inextricably intertwined in webs of interconnection and interdependency. Indeed, what it promises clients is the opportunity to establish "closer

ties" (that is, to strengthen *existing* connections rather than to create new ones) with "the natural communities that they depend on" (which is to say, biotic communities they are *already* enmeshed in). This notion of dependence is decisive since it recognizes the extent to which humans rely on what is not human for their very existence. Humans depend upon a livable world, that is, a world capable of sustaining them (Butler 2004). This entails, over and against the anthropocentric wish for an autonomous and extra-dependent human, an ecologically stable and sustainable world. It is a recognition of the deep entanglement of the human and the more-than-human, an affirmation of the undeniable (yet uncomfortable) fact that ecology is an ontological issue to which we must attend. Thus, beyond facile forms of "green washing" that predominate in rhetorics of consumer activism (Corbett 2006), the Preserve does in fact make possible alternative, ecological forms of connection with the more-than-human world.

This deeper connection is attained most forcefully through bodily dispersal in the form of burial. While the Preserve neither uses the language of dispersal nor outwardly discusses the decomposition of human bodies on its homepage, the concept and process of dispersal are embedded within Ramsey Creek's understanding of burial's relation to conservation. As the Preserve's homepage puts it, "Through becoming members of the preserve during life, and choosing burial in the preserve after, *our clients leave a permanent legacy for their families, their communities and the natural world*" (emphasis mine). On its face, this statement seems paradoxical since natural burial moves away from a focus on permanent bodily integrity promised by the funeral industry. Indeed, natural burial obfuscates the various products and practices designed precisely to shore up the dead human body, what deathcare scholar John Troyer (2007) has called the

"postmortem subject." A counter-hegemonic rhetoric is at work here. By avoiding toxic embalming fluids and funereal mediation, the Preserve's story goes, natural burial secures a "permanent legacy" by suturing the body itself to the "natural world." Natural burial's seeming immediacy makes possible a lasting legacy that stands to impact future generations and the land-community itself. This corporeal connection with the earth secures permanence through dispersal: integrated into the land-community, the body becomes part of and inseparable from the ecosystem. Thus incorporated, the body need not remain stable or coherent in order to continue exerting force. Rather, the trans-corporeal body becomes consubstantial with the land and so indistinguishable from it (Alaimo 2010). Thus, the "permanent legacy" promised by the Preserve and by conservation burial more generally depends upon a recognition that bodies are re-assembled rather than annihilated when they enter into the "more-than-human flux" (Plumwood 2008, 75).

Dispersed throughout the ecosystem, the human body transforms the land-community. To capture this transformation, in *A Brief History of Death*, Douglas Davies (2005) coined the term "ecological immortality." Against the backdrop of bodily integrity promoted by conventional funeral and burial practices, the notion of ecological immortality recognizes "the intrinsic relationship between the human body and the world as a natural system within which the ongoingness of life is grounded in the successive life and death of individual animals and plants, indeed, of all things" (Davies 2005, 86-87). Put otherwise, the idea of ecological immortality takes seriously the fact that human bodies will eventually decompose, thus losing their form and even their recognizability as bodies as such. Our conventional sense of, and even desire for, immortality would imply

that the body or soul itself possessed some permanence. Yet, appending the word "ecological" to our concept of immortality shifts this dimension considerably: it is not the body itself, as a temporarily bounded being, that exerts force perpetually but the mortal materiality of the body, fragmented and dispersed, that endlessly moves through time and space even as it transforms. Form changes: the body decomposes, is consumed, and transmogrifies. It becomes otherwise and, in doing so, ensures a "permanent legacy" through the incessant modification of form.

On its website, Ramsey Creek Preserve also includes an extensive photo gallery, which comprises images of the grounds, the stream, and burial services, as well as visual catalogues of the many species of flora and fauna that inhabit the land-community. I read the hundreds of photographs of plants, flowers, mushrooms, fungi, and insects included on the Preserve's website as an illustration of the multiple becomings made possible through bodily dispersal. For instance, in the album named "Flowers and Other Plants of Ramsey Creek," one visually encounters full-color, close-up photographs of Black-Eyed Susan, Carolina Elephant's Foot, Dwarf Buckeye, Lyre-Leaf Sage, Paw Paw, Trout Lily, and Wild Quinine, to name just a few ("Ramsey Creek Gallery" n.d.). Although these images certainly demonstrate the plethora of plants on the grounds of Ramsey Creek Preserve, they also do more than this. These photographs also visualize the products of dispersal, that is, the outcomes of decay and decomposition. Flowers and plants depend on rich soil, which is itself the product of multiple kinds of organisms decaying and comingling with other organic and inorganic materials. Dirt blurs the boundaries between entities, often to the point of illegibility. At the Preserve, human bodies intimately intertwine with the soil and, by extension, become (one with) the dirt into which they are

laid. Over time, the human body becomes less and less distinct from the land-community. And, eventually, it becomes impossible to recognize the body *as such*. What is left are traces of the body (and others) in the form of new life.

Without recourse to the body as such, the "permanent legacy" promised by the Preserve or the sense of "ecological immortality" described by Davies might be visually apprehended in the whole of the biotic community. Flora and fauna that inhabit the land function not as direct re-presentations of any individual's heritage, but, rather, as potential traces of the dispersed body. Every flower, shrub, tree, insect, or animal that makes a home in and around the Preserve *might* be a visual-material trace of a body buried in the earth. The Preserve becomes an exemplar of Heraclitus' insight that things are always changing and becoming otherwise. Just as a river is always in flux, so too is the human body always transforming in its composition in other assemblages, including postmortem gatherings of human and more-than-human materialities.

From death, fertility. From decay, fecundity. Out of sight but not out of mind, the buried bodies at Ramsey Creek Preserve articulate a *carnal claim* to the land. Drawing nutrients from the soil, which is itself enriched by buried human remains, the entire biotic community—from the soil's smallest microorganisms to the area's charismatic megafauna (in the body of the routine deer and occasional black bear)—inherits the dispersed bodies of the dead, fragment by fragment, bit by bit, cell by cell. Withering away underfoot, this flesh fortifies rhetorical demands to delay development, to halt the wheels of progress, to conserve the land.

Carnal Claims, Part One: Performative Body Rhetorics

What I am suggesting is that the human bodies buried and decomposing in the damp earth at Ramsey Creek Preserve do rhetorical work. These bodies, exposed as they are to the deteriorating force of the land-community, articulate a claim even as they lie silently in the earth beneath several feet of soil. Seemingly voiceless, apparently motionless, these decaying corpses in fact lay claim to the biotic community. To grasp the rhetorical force of the decomposing human body, it is necessary to put aside theories of rhetoric that depend upon a living, breathing, speaking subject (e.g., R. E. McKerrow 1993). In its place, we must install a theory of rhetoric that is attuned to the carnal claims put forth by all bodies, one that acknowledges and can account for the effectivity of fleshly assemblages that exert force not by articulating claims in a legible language but, on the contrary, by formulating demands through performative practices.

The idea of performativity deployed here stems from J. L. Austin's (1962) *How To Do Things With Words*, a series of lectures delivered at various universities from 1951 to 1955, in which he described a form of communication that functions not by describing or representing a particular relationship but by constituting, through the enactment of an utterance within a certain context, the relationship itself. In contrast with a descriptive utterance, which can in some sense be evaluated regarding its veracity, a performative utterance has no content that could be judged on these grounds. Performative utterances, Austin wrote, "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false.'" In contrast with a descriptive statement—*It is currently raining outside*, for instance, which at this moment of writing is not quite a true statement—performative utterances do not convey anything about the world as it is. Rather, as Austin argued, "the

uttering of the [performative] sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (5). Thus, performative utterances *do things*—they make things happen, set relationships into motion, carry out some function. They are effective in the sense that they induce rather than describe a state of affairs.

To illustrate the ubiquity and force of performative utterances, Austin offered several examples. In a wedding ceremony, for instance, when the two people getting hitched say "I do" they are not so much describing their willingness and intention to get married as they are, in that particular moment and context, suturing themselves one to the other in a legal contract. Or, for example, when two friends say to one another "I bet you twenty dollars that the Georgia Bulldogs will win tomorrow's football game," and do so in good faith and with the capacity to make good on that bet should they lose, they do not so much describe a fiduciary responsibility as they bring one into existence. Nominalism is also often performative. Whether naming a ship or a child or a species of rodent, the act of naming depends upon a performative utterance: "I name this child, my child, Judith." Under the appropriate conditions, this act of naming makes it so.

As each of these examples drawn from Austin's initial formulation make clear, performative utterances seem to be limited and conditioned by context. A friend and I cannot legally marry just by saying "I do" in the company of one another. Nor can I name something that does not in some sense belong to me or over which I do not have a certain kind of legal power. Rather, it would seem, performative utterances exert force only in combination with a number of other necessary contextual elements, discursive and otherwise. As Austin (1962, 8) argued,

> it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very

> commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words.

Thus, for a performative utterance to be effective, an entire assemblage of elements must be properly in order. To this end, Austin distinguished between felicitous and infelicitous contexts. Performatives only "work" to the extent that they are uttered in felicitous, or "happy," situations. Hence, Austin noted, there must be an established convention carried out by actors who are in the right mental state of mind and who intend to carry out the effect of the performative. Moreover, these actors must comply correctly and completely with the convention. All of this must take place as well in the appropriate circumstances. If all of these conditions are met, then and only then do performative utterances have a chance of exerting force.

To get a sense of how decomposing bodies are performative, it is useful to get beyond Austin's (1962) initial formulation since it retains and even requires the presence of a living, breathing, speaking subject who is motivated, intentional, and mentally capable of making decisions about its future actions. In critiques of Austin, Derrida (1982; 1988) pushed the concept of performativity in several productive directions. Especially in "Signature Event Context," Derrida applauds Austin's efforts to detach communication from the transmission of a stabilized meaning but also questions whether the formulation of performativity in *How To Do Things With Words* goes far enough in theorizing how communication functions more generally. Whereas Austin limited performative utterances to determinable contexts, Derrida suggested that all communication might operate less as the transmission of meaning and more as the movement of force. From this perspective, communication in general can be seen as a

kind of performativity to the extent that all communicative acts risk doing things in the world.

Derrida's criticism of Austin hinges on three related problems. First, Derrida puts under pressure the limitations that Austin initially imposed on performativity. In particular, he argued, the issue of context is more complex and indeterminate than Austin suggested. For Derrida (1982, 310), "a context is never absolutely determinable," which implies that one cannot know for sure whether one is acting within a felicitous or infelicitous context, nor can one be sure at the moment of uttering what will happen. We can never exhaust the elements of a context since there is always the possibility that some new, unexpected element might emerge to disrupt or destabilize the circumstances within which we find ourselves.

Second, if context cannot be determined in the way that Austin suggested (i.e., by checking to see if a certain number of requirements have been met), it is possible that all performative utterances might break with their designated contexts. Austin admits as much when he writes that apparently performative language may appear outside felicitous contexts (as in the case of actors who "play" on stage). Derrida stressed this point by claiming that in order to operate at all a performative utterance must cite other communicative acts that took place in other contexts, which means that every performative utterance is by definition capable of exceeding what for Austin (1962, 22) were "ordinary circumstances." In other words, in order for a performative utterance to be intelligible at all it must form part of an iterative structure; "I do" only makes sense if it repeats (and in this sense it is not all that different from acting) other "I dos" that were said in other contexts and by other actors.

Third, and most important for the work of this chapter, Derrida pushed performativity outside the domain of spoken language and plunged it into the deeper well of embodied communication. In doing so, he further detached communication from the transmission of meaning and related it to the production and dissemination of forces. "To the semantic field of the word *communication*," he argued, "belongs the fact that it also designates nonsemantic movements" (Derrida 1982, 309). The body itself, even before or without speaking, communicates. One may, Derrida argued, "*communicate a movement*" (309), which is to say that the body exerts forces that exceed linguistic and semiotic meaning. A gesture, a look, or even an odor is enough to signal something to audiences (e.g., Seegert 2014). A rolling eye, an upturned nose, a cold shoulder, an intense stare: these embodied forms of communication make a difference. "What happens in this case, what is transmitted or communicated, are not phenomena of meaning or signification," Derrida writes (309). Rather, these are material forces which are communicated by and through the body.

Since performativity is less hemmed in than Austin (1962) might originally have surmised, Derrida's deconstruction makes it possible to consider a wider range of practices than those few spoken utterances that seem to *do* more than they *describe*. Since Austin put forth his theory of performativity, the concept itself has taken on a life of its own as scholars across the disciplines have sought out ways to render its explanatory power simultaneously more legible and more expansive. Perhaps more than anyone else, Judith Butler popularized the notion of performativity through her philosophical consideration of the social construction of gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) argued that over and against a biological conception of gender, we need to account for the

performative practices that produce gender as such. Regardless of one's genitals, she contended, gender is made in the ritualized daily practices of dress, speech, and gesture that one enacts wittingly or unwittingly, more or less in accordance with culturally established norms. The sureness of one's gender, Butler contended, is relative only to the consistency with which one performs according to one or another style—masculinity or femininity. There is, then, no essential or originary gender but, rather, only repetitions or iterations—we might say citations—of other performances of gender. Little "girls" become "women" by reproducing on and through their bodies a set of stylistic acts we conventionally call "feminine." The accumulated effects of these movements are what we call genders. What Butler's work demonstrates is the extent to which the body itself, far from being a transparent and essential material object, is enrolled in the rhetorical constitution of gender: through the embodied repetition of certain norms, gender is stabilized and comes to *seem* essential. Yet, because there is no originary gender to which all of these stylistic efforts ultimately refer, the norms can be ruptured through alternative performative repertoires that challenge and even parody the norm (drag, for example). There are, of course, significant social and political ramifications that might emerge once gender is understood not as a biological given but as a social production, not least of which is a renewed sense of what the human body can do.

Importantly, the human body is neither only nor simply an effect of performativity. The body is always excessive. Following up on complaints that her work about the performativity of gender ignored the materiality of the body, in a book called *Bodies That Matter* Butler (1993, xi) argues that,

> *surely bodies live and die*; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these 'facts' one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be

> dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences. And surely there is. (emphasis mine)

Death, as Butler suggests here, recalls the body's extra-discursive dimension since death happens to the body both within and without discourses on death, dying, and deathcare. Death happens, to be sure, within discourses: we understand and respond to death differentially, as Derrida (1993) demonstrates, depending on the "cultures of death" that we variously inhabit and animate. Rituals and traditions are discursively produced and sustained ways of relating to death. Telling certain kinds of stories about the dead and enacting particular rites on and around dead bodies are discursively sedimented acts, which provide grieving survivors with a language and a grammar for responding to death. Yet, death also exceeds discourse: it is the material effect of material processes that cannot, in any sure sense, be hastened or delayed by the intervention of discursive mediation. The experience of death, an experience limited by its force of individualization, defies the power of language to encapsulate or to represent precisely what it *is* (e.g., Scarry 1985). It is irreducible to discourse, or even to an effect of discourse. Rather, when death happens it exceeds the meaningful and forceful dimensions of language and of discourse more generally. It is the violent surging forth of a materiality that cannot be subsumed.

The notion of bodily performativity found in Butler's work on gender strongly resonates with the concept of "body rhetoric" that has proliferated within rhetorical studies in recent decades. Though, as Debra Hawhee (2006, 155) argues, "rhetoric, from its inception, was and is a bodily art," the field of rhetorical studies is still grappling with how to bring the body more fully into its purview. Recent scholars have nevertheless

pursued the rhetorical dimensions of embodiment from a number of different vantage points.[2] Kevin DeLuca's (1999) concept of body rhetoric in particular goes a long way toward comprehending the rhetorical force of the human body in contexts of social movement. Against the dominant focus in rhetoric on speech and language, DeLuca (1999, 10) argued that in some instances "bodies […] become […] the site and substance of the argument itself." For example, activists marching through streets and blocking traffic can temporarily rupture the taken-for-granted flow of people, machines, goods, and services in a given area. Environmental activists who bury themselves, all but their heads, in logging roads or who live in trees slated to be cut down can similarly delay damaging deforestation from taking place. While these activists and the organizations they work with almost always also speak or write, it is their bodies that exert material force and that contingently shape social relations.

Body rhetorics work in large part because they expose the vulnerability and

---

[2] A brief survey of recent work demonstrates the extent to which human bodies are central to contemporary theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of rhetoric. The arguments are expansive. There are those who contend that the critic's body is central to the act of criticism and, therefore, that we need to consider our embodiment as we work with artifacts (Condit 2013; McHendry et al. 2014; R. McKerrow 1989; M. K. Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres 2011; M. Middleton et al. 2015; Pezzullo 2007). There are also those who focus on the ways in which bodily relations are represented and recomposed in and by rhetorical texts (Barnett 2015a; Barnett 2015b; Barnett 2016; Barnett 2017; C. L. Harold 1999; C. Harold 2000; C. Harold and DeLuca 2005; Landau 2012; Morris and Sloop 2006; Rogers 1998; Schutten 2008). And then there are those who study how audiences' bodies are impinged upon by different kinds of rhetorics (Barnett 2017; Carbaugh 1999; Cram 2012; Pezzullo 2003; Pezzullo 2007). Others deal more rigorously with the affective and emotional dimensions of discourse (DeLuca 2006; Edbauer Rice 2008; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Gruber 2014; Gunn 2012; Gunn and Rice 2009; Landau 2016; Ott 2010; Ott and Keeling 2011). What these and other scholars recognize is the extent to which the human body is bound up with and inextricable from rhetorical practice and reception. For these scholars, the human body is endlessly entangled in rhetorical encounters: as rhetor, as medium, as content, and as audience, the human body pervades rhetoric.

precarity of the human body. When environmental activists bury themselves in logging roads or live in trees, they put themselves in harm's way. It is always possible, after all, that the logging trucks will continue down the road and nothing necessarily prevents men armed with chainsaws from cutting down trees, even those with human bodies suspended amongst their branches. Thus, DeLuca (1999, 11) contends that these forms of embodied activism "have challenged and changed the meanings of the world not through good reasons but through *vulnerable* bodies, not through rational arguments but through *bodies at risk*" (emphasis mine). The vulnerable and at-risk bodies of activists demand attention precisely because they highlight the interdependency of the human and, in some cases, the more-than-human world. Exposed to the elements, incapable of performing certain tasks for themselves, these bodies compel audiences to respond in ways that are sustaining rather than destructive. In her work on environmental justice activism, Pezzullo (2007) comes to a similar conclusion when she suggests that toxic tours work in part because they render the bodies of tourists vulnerable to debilitating forms of toxic pollution. Both rhetors and audiences are potentially moved by the vulnerability of their own bodies and others' bodies.

The notion of body rhetoric deployed by DeLuca does not assume an originary body that is in and of itself—that is, *by itself*—capable of making an argument. Rather, for DeLuca (1999, 12), "There are no *a priori* bodies. Bodies are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what they mean in particular contexts." Within a particular discursive matrix, one in which the human body is valued and in which life is privileged over death, the vulnerable human body not only draws attention to itself but also powerfully demands care and support. This is a familiar

discourse in the United States where a form of anthropocentrism privileges the human above all else. Yet, as DeLuca (1999, 13) argues, embodied environmental activism often exploits this point in order to articulate an ecological ethic:

> In refuting human-centered worldviews, the protestors' bodies give presence to the proposition that humans are not apart from the natural world but a part of it. They disclose the possibility of an ecocentric world.

In other words, by physically entangling themselves in broader ecosystems, the at-risk bodies of environmental activists also might create a space for thinking about the forms of care and support demanded by the land-community itself. As Mark Smith (1998, 5) defines it, "Ecocentrism places human beings in a different relationship to the natural environment," which "means that human beings are part of a more complex system and no longer sit at the top of the ethical hierarchy." Thus, part of the performative force of embodied environmental activism—of what DeLuca calls body rhetoric—is the creation of an ecocentric discourse in which the entire ecosystem comes to be seen as in need of the same attention and care that individual human beings warrant. Indistinguishable one from the other, both the human body and the body of the land demand support.

Oscillation: Bodily Dispersal in *A Will for the Woods*

In 2014, directors Amy Browne, Tony Hale, Jeremy Kaplan, and Brian Wilson (2014) released *A Will for the Woods*, a documentary which traces the emergence of the idea and practice of conservation burial in the United States and the struggles that make alternative burial options possible. The film's website asks, "What if our last act could be a gift to the planet?" This sense that burial offers an opportunity to transform "our last act" into "a gift" becomes more salient as the film unfolds and viewers are brought into

intimate contact with one family's efforts to transform burial practices in their community. According to one *New York Times* critic, "The film shows how funeral planning can be a palliative [...] and an opportunity to shape a legacy" (Kenigsberg 2014). Some critics worry that the film missed out on a chance to take the modern funeral industry to task for its ecologically unsustainable ways: "*A Will for the Woods* is more contemplative than preachy. This spirit might, ironically, limit its audience more than if it had drawn a harder and angrier line" ("Film Review: *A Will for the Woods*" 2014). Despite receiving somewhat mixed reviews, *A Will for the Woods* was recognized with nine awards from various film festivals, including four audience awards ("About the Film" 2016), has been purchased on the streaming website Vimeo more than 16,000 times, and has aired several times on the American Public Broadcasting Corporation channel and the World channel.

At an hour-and-a-half long, *A Will for the Woods* tracks three unfolding stories: the life and death of the terminally ill Dr. Clark Wang, whose struggle with cancer leads him to seek out a more meaningful death; the establishment of a green burial cemetery at Pine Forest Memorial Gardens in Wake Forest, North Carolina, where Clark's body is buried; and the development of the Green Burial Council, the nongovernmental organization that both sets the standards for and certifies green burial operations in the United States. Interweaving these three interrelated stories, the film draws on a number of conventional documentary techniques, such as personal interviews, *in situ* shots of relevant places and processes, and the inclusion of found footage and audio. *A Will for the Woods* not only features people who verbally articulate the potential force of bodily dispersal at work in conservation burial but also, through its oscillatory form, invites

audiences to consider the ways in which the human body is always already entangled in ecosystems and how it can be enrolled to secure ecological stability.

In this section, I show how the film articulates connections between the human body and the more-than-human world on three scales, beginning with the micro-level of a single life. *A Will for the Woods* introduces audiences to Clark by way of an oscillatory aesthetic that moves back and forth between images of his animate body and images of the animate earth. At the beginning of the film, after an introductory segment that shows an unknown person's natural burial unfolding in a snow-covered field, the documentary presents Clark's story to audiences through archival footage. The grainy, saturated film fills the entirety of the screen, surrounded by a dark black border characteristic of older forms of film technology. In the found recordings, Clark is shown taking part in a number of activities, mostly musical performances and dances, activities that, as the film proceeds, we learn are integral to his sense of identity. We watch as he plays the cello (Figure 1) and the bagpipe, and as he dances excitedly with others to the sounds of traditional music. This found footage is intercut with close-up, macro shots of plants, flowers, and soil. Blades of grass (Figure 2) and sprouting flowers punctuate the moving images of Clark's vibrant life. Two forms of vitality are depicted in these images: a human life shown in retrospect and plant life budding on the forest floor.

The documentary's oscillatory aesthetic begins to articulate a sense of bodily dispersal by optically intermingling the human and the more-than-human. By intercutting the footage of Clark's life with macro shots of flora, these multiple kinds of vitality (and thus mortality) are articulated to one another, depicted as interconnected in some way. The effervescence of Clark's life is akin to the vibrancy of life on the forest floor. As he

Figure 1 Dr. Clark Wang (right) playing the cello. Screenshot from *A Will for the Woods.*

Figure 2 A blade of grass. Screenshot from *A Will for the Woods.*

moves, so too do the plants. As he grows and changes in the found footage, so too do the flora transform. Fragmentary, both the found footage and the images of plant life suggest an incoherent yet inescapable form of relationality. The intercutting is offered without verbal explanation; thus, it is up to audiences to make sense of the movement back and forth between human and more-than-human life.

As noted above, body rhetorics often rely on the force of the vulnerable body to not only draw attention to arguments but to also make demands of their own for certain kinds of care and support, for infrastructures that muffle rather than amplify precarity. Visually, vulnerable bodies can be a compelling form of rhetorical activity—on display, such bodies invite audiences to respond to their precarity (e.g., see Barnett 2015b; C. Harold and DeLuca 2005; Murray Yang 2011; Zelizer 2010). In the film's beginning sequences vulnerability is imaged as entanglement, as a kind of inextricable connection. Indeed, the movement between images of Clark's body and the body of land sutures the one to the other in a collective, cross-species claim: perhaps we are not that different, perhaps there is continuity in life. Both similarity and difference come out in these oscillating images. Like a connective tissue, the images bind human and more-than-human not as identical but as interrelated, interdependent, and differential kinds of beings caught up in ways that cannot be easily separated.

By establishing a tie among the human and the more-than-human, the documentary produces at least two kinds of demands: on the one hand, if Clark's life is similar to plant life, it must be seen as precarious and as exposed to harm. Plants are not without defenses of their own, yet by and large plants are easily destroyed by human and nonhuman animals. They can be cut down, harvested, trampled, eaten, or poisoned. And,

on the other hand, if plant life is similar to Clark's life, it must be seen as valuable and as worthy of protection. While not all human lives are equally valued (Butler 2009), generally speaking human life is seen as something to be cared for, something to be supported. By intercutting images of Clark with those of flora, the documentary demonstrates the extent to which both humans and more-than-human beings share (or could share) these qualities of vulnerability induced by mortality.

The interconnection of human and more-than-human forms of life is further articulated by an aural consistency in these opening, oscillatory scenes. As the film cuts between images of Clark and images of plants, the background music remains the same. Sampled from the video recordings of Clark playing various instruments, both solo and in concert with others, the music for this oscillatory scene establishes a sense of continuity. As the images shift between Clark and the plants, the music ties the images together, sonically expressing a sense that the forms of life shown in these images are not alien to one another but rather alike in important ways. Since music is often used in films to demarcate scenes or to differentiate among actors, it is important that in *A Will for the Woods* the same music serves as background for depictions of multiple species. Even as the images oscillate, the aural connects. Without flattening the human into the vegetal, or the vegetal to the human, the soundtrack suggests a sense of solidarity.

The visual movement betwixt and between images of human and more-than-human life continues in *A Will for the Woods*, scaling up from the micro-level of Clark's singular life to a more general form of interconnection among human and more-than-human beings. At various points in the documentary, scenes are intercut with a recurring image of an opening in a forest (Figure 3), presumably at Ramsey Creek Preserve or

Figure 3 Recurring scene of an opening in the forest. Screenshot from *A Will for the Woods.*

Pine Forest Memorial Gardens, though the locale is never specified. The image shows a lush, verdant woodland forest, with tall, leafy trees stretching upward toward the sky. In the center of the image there appears to be a clearing in the trees, perhaps a road or path down which bodies are driven or carried to their graves. Dirt and decaying leaves give the opening a dark brown hue, contrasting with the greenness of the leafy foliage on either side.

Repeated throughout the film, this recurring image of the forest serves a similar function as those close-up shots of plant life that are interspersed with images of Clark at the beginning of the film. The repetition of this image importantly reminds viewers that what is at stake in discussions of natural burial are precisely ecosystems, not just individual people. While the humans who are depicted in the film—Clark and his partner Jane Ezzard; the director of Pine Forest Memorial Gardens, the founders of Ramsey

Creek Preserve, and the director of the Green Burial Council, among others—take part in cultural transformations, this image draws viewers' attention back to the larger land-community toward which these efforts are directed and upon which they will impact. Indeed, this image of a verdant forest, while perhaps drawing on a pastoral repertoire, functions in the documentary as a way of linking the cultural practices of deathcare to the broader question of ecosystem sustainability. Whereas conventional burial often does harm to the land-community by denuding it and then filling it with toxins, conservation burial is linked here with a world less spoiled by human hubris and intervention. In its repetitious invocation of what appear to be natural settings, *A Will for the Woods* asserts that bodily dispersal (in the form of conservation burial) is good for ecological relations, that it is a means of securing stability and sustainability.

The last third of the film sutures the practice of bodily dispersal to land conservation by focusing on Clark's death and interment at the newly established conservation burial area at Pine Forest Memorial Gardens. Clark's body, delivered to North Carolina in a refrigerated container, is kept in his and Jane's home for several days to facilitate visitations and final preparations. Moving from the brightly lit, sterile space of the hospital room to the dark, homey scene of Clark and Jane's house, the film articulates a sense of return: a retreat from the modern miracle of medicine and a return to the warmth and comforts of home. Family, friends, and natural deathcare specialists gather round Clark's body to wash it, to anoint it with oils, and to watch over it before yet another return—to the soil. When it comes time to bury Clark, friends and family lift his simple wooden coffin into the back of a pickup truck and transport it to the gravesite where they again lift it and then lower it into the red North Carolina soil. Guests speak,

throw magnolia branches into Clark's grave, hold one another tightly, and then help cover his grave by hand. The cemetery director tells guests that they can always bring out the machines to do this labor, but reminds them that they "know what Clark would think about that."

A Will for the Woods comes to a close, as one might expect, amongst the trees. Once Clark's grave is completely covered and adorned with greenery (Figure 4), guests trickle off back to their cars and their lives. Clark, body firmly planted several feet down in the damp Carolina clay, is there to stay, there in the forest surrounded by flora and fauna that will soon be benefiting from the new energy he adds to the ecosystem in the form of his flesh. Out of sight, in*corpo*rated into the earth, Clark's body joins a new assemblage, now part and parcel of a broader land-community.

Figure 4 Dr. Clark Wang's covered grave. Screenshot from *A Will for the Woods.*

Carnal Claims, Part Two: Dispersing Bodily Traces

This concept of the land-community undergirds the work of Ramsey Creek Preserve, and is rooted in Aldo Leopold's (1949) pathbreaking *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he articulates "the land ethic." The land ethic calls for a reconceptualization of what constitutes "community" by including the more-than-human world within its purview. Although some critics contend that Leopold's ethical program is too vague or wide-sweeping to be put into practice in any rigorous way, its broadest maxims remain touchstones in ecological thinking and conservation work. In brief, Leopold argued that an ecological ethic should both account for and be responsible to the more-than-human world, thereby expanding who counts as a member of the ethical community.

Opening ethical relations up to "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land," Leopold suggested, is necessary in mending the onslaught of human-induced ecological damage that threatens continued earthly coexistence (239). When the interests of ecosystems, which Leopold sometimes called "land-communities," are considered in ethical decisions, it is more difficult to make choices that will further deteriorate ecological stability. This is so, according to the author of "The Land Ethic," because as ecological consciousness grows people begin to see themselves as intricately bound up with and in the biotic assemblages they depend upon. From an ecological perspective, it is impossible to see oneself as somehow outside of or beyond the land-community. Hence, Leopold prescribed the following broad axiom: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262).

Leopold's land ethic not only makes clear that humans are part and parcel of

ecosystems but also that we bear an ethical responsibility to our fellow human beings and all the other creatures with whom we coexist on Earth. Doing so requires, however, that we recuperate from the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the relationship among human beings and broader ecosystems. As Carolyn Merchant (1983) argues, prior to the Industrial Revolution (which began in the mid-1700s), an organismic metaphor shaped most thinking about humanity's place within the environment. Earth was seen as an organism composed of many parts. The health of the whole Earth depended on the health of its constituent elements. But as machine technologies replaced human and more-than-human labor (the horse-drawn carriage, for instance), as the steam engine ostensibly chugged towards something called "Progress," the West adopted a mechanistic metaphor that not only transformed the everyday lives of humans but also greatly diminished our connections with the animate earth. For many thinkers this transformation in thought marked a crucial turning point in human-ecology relations, heralding unprecedented exploitation and destruction of the Earth's natural resources. The mechanistic view implied that the parts, while not unimportant, were at the very least interchangeable and replaceable. As a result, less care was given to the vulnerable and finite land-community. As Lynn White (1967, 1204) suggested, "surely no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order." We are faced today, in the form of the cumulative results of hundreds of years of industrialization and development, with a startling reminder of our entanglement with ecosystems: climate chaos. As our current predicament makes clear: we are inescapably part of—and, therefore, responsible for and susceptible to—earth. It is our "nest."

Since our capacity as human beings to transform and, therefore, damage

ecosystems is in some sense unmatched by other species, so too, Leopold contends, must our commitment to protect the more-than-human world be courageous and capacious. This requires a shift in thinking and practice: "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (Leopold 1949, 240). Human beings, like tigers and deer and oak and sagebrush and ants and horseflies, are one among many species vying for a hospitable habitat. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1999, 141) reminds us, humans tend to think that we are central when in reality we are but one among countless creatures: "if we could communicate with a midge," he wrote, "we would hear that it too floats through the air with the very same pathos, feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of this world." Yet, hubris and technology for too long have enabled we humans to see ourselves as distinct from and better than our fellow creatures.

The land ethic attempts to bring us back down to earth: ecology is an earthbound way of thinking. From its point of view, all transcendentalisms are suspicious. From our bipedal position, feet firmly on solid ground, stripped of all technological apparatuses (perhaps, especially, shoes and clothing), it quickly becomes clear that we lack, at a fundamental level, much advantage over those with whom we coexist (cf. Abram 1996; Kohák 1987; Uexküll 1957). The challenge of the land ethic is not to rid ourselves of all such technologies, not to enact a naïve version of deep ecology's return to nature, but, rather, to live as though we are part of, not apart from, ecosystems. In Leopold's as in Latour's (2007) work, then, we encounter a flattening of sorts. Within ecosystems, humans act but so too do many other actants—living, animate, vital, or otherwise. The water cycle impacts humans, for example, even as humans impinge upon it. Embracing

our role as "plain member and citizen" of the land-community is a means of grappling with this flat ontology. Moreover, it is a way of respecting the many actors, our fellow creatures, with whom we continuously must learn to coexist.

It would be tempting at this point to rehearse a common refrain in ecological circles, namely, that the best way for humans to make amends with the land is to get our greedy hands off the steering wheel, to let ecosystems be, to "become one" with the earth instead of mastering it (cf. Abram 1996; Kohák 1987; White 1967). It is easy to make such claims, but much harder to live them out. So, I want to stick close to Leopold's land ethic, which asks not that humans extract themselves from ecological relations—as if that were possible—but instead that we thoughtfully and caringly engage with other ecological actors in ways that are mutually beneficial. In other words, the land ethic calls on us to engage in symbiotic relations. For example, the land ethic does not nihilistically advise that humans attempt to survive without earth's "resources," but rather proposes that humans live in relation to the earth without ruining it for ourselves and others in the process. "An ethic, ecologically," Leopold (1949, 238) wrote, "is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence [...] the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation. The ecologist calls these symbioses." Symbiosis implies getting on together, living and dying in the company of others. Symbiotic relationships are not pure. Partners in symbiosis take and receive in different ways. The challenge is not to learn how to give without taking but to learn to take without becoming, as Serres (2007) put it, a parasite on our earthen host. For *Homo sapiens*, this means learning to inhabit the earth without gluttonously using up more of its resources than we need and being mindful of the overall biome's health, not just our own gustatory

satisfaction.

Burial and cremation are resource- and energy-intensive practices that enroll humans in ethical relation with the more-than-human world. In particular, conventional burial requires the use of millions of tons of material resources annually and consumes space within land-communities indefinitely. Thus, burial practices raise significant questions about property. In several poignant texts, Serres (1995; 2007; 2011) challenges anthropocentrism by pointing to the problem of private property across heterogeneous times and places. Throughout *Malfeasance*, Serres discusses several practices of marking property that humans have historically engaged. Like many other animals, he argues, humans have found ways of claiming things as their own by making a mark, by leaving a trace that defines this or that object as a particular individual's belonging. The origin of private property, Serres (2011, 12) speculates, lies not in "some convention or positive right" but, rather, in practices of marking territory with "urine, blood, excretions, rotting corpses." By emitting various excrements or wastes upon the land, humans have secured for ourselves the power of inhabitation while excluding possible cohabitants. It is not difficult to extrapolate from here: erecting buildings; paving parking lots and roads; spewing emissions into the air; and dumping trash into the oceans and onto massive garbage heaps are all ways of demarcating human territory. Serres (1995, 33) condemns humans for marking the earth in these and other ways, lamenting that, "the sullied world reveals the mark of humanity, the mark of its dominators, the foul stamp of their hold and their appropriation."

By marking the earth with various forms of excrement, including corpses, humans appropriate the world for themselves. By establishing lines of private property, by

communicating to others that "this land is our land," as one song goes, we appropriate via pollution. By tarnishing the world, we make it our own. Spit in the soup, Serres says, and suddenly the entire pot is yours alone. Indeed, we have reached a point at which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what is pure and what is contaminated. Pollution has so thoroughly overtaken the world—in the form of what he calls "hard" (physical) and "soft" (symbolic) contaminants—that the entire world now seems sullied. Whereas this could be seen as debilitating, in Serres's (2011, 71) work this becomes the condition of transforming the world: "by generalizing or globalizing dirt and so erasing the borders where polluting starts or stops, and hence appropriation, *the right to property suddenly reaches an intolerable threshold and becomes literally unbearable*." In other words, once the mark of humanity, of private property, becomes generalized it becomes untenable. If everything is marked by humanity, we will eventually come to detest the nest that we have fouled. We will be moved by our own pollution to change our ways. Serres, perhaps sardonically, concludes that, "We must therefore rethink this right, meaning go beyond its present status where it still resembles animal behaviors. One more step must be taken on the difficult road toward hominization" (71).

To counteract the ecological damages incurred as a result of marking the land, Serres advocates that humans enter into a "natural contract" with one another and with the earth itself. This idea of the natural contract emerges at a moment when, as Serres understands it, humans have so changed the earth that the earth now threatens human existence. No longer at war with other human beings (following the World Wars), we are now at war with the earth itself. Like the "social contract," which some thinkers use as a means of describing the development of civil societies and the avoidance of war of all

against all, Serres positions the natural contract as a way of making peace with the earth. "We must make a new pact," he writes, "a new preliminary agreement with the objective enemy of the human world: the world as such" (Serres 1995, 15). In *Malfeasance*, Serres (2011, 78–79) describes some of what might be involved in such an agreement:

> I suggest we free ourselves from all these conducts and constraints of appropriation, that we get rid of all these excrements. I suggest that, in one and the same move repeated everywhere, **we free** the earth from the sacred, from blood, sacrifice, war; **the soil from death, corpses, tombs, and cemeteries**; the women and children from sexual and genital appropriation and subjection; space and our perception from advertising appropriation; and finally *the planet from the dirty bomb of property*. Have I finally discovered the new name of freedom? Leasing, libertarian freedom. (bolded emphases mine)

Thus, the natural contract imagined by Serres involves two forms of liberation. On the one hand, it is humans who would be liberated. Detaching ourselves from the pull of private property, we would be free to live like travellers, roaming without owning, leasing without buying. On the other hand, it is the earth as such that would be liberated. As humans detach themselves from the drive to create private property, so Serres's argument goes, the earth benefits from the reduced focus on marking the land, of carving up private property. With the natural contract, the earth is no longer seen as a resource to be mined, to be exploited, to be owned, but rather a space of cohabitation and coexistence within which we must learn to get along with others without the reassurance of ownership, control, or mastery.

Embedded within Serres's notion of the natural contract is a concept of writing that I would like to elaborate here via a final detour through Derridean thought. For Derrida, the concept of writing is not limited to the conventional sense in which marks are inscribed upon some surface. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1976, 44) invites us to

think of "the world as space of inscription." If the "world" is a scene of "inscription," of writing in a general sense, it is possible to think of the physical world—"the land," to remain within Leopold's idiom—neither as a *tabula rasa* nor as an overdetermined space, but rather as a densely woven text upon which some inscriptions have already been carved and upon which others will be placed. Indeed, Derrida proposes that the concept of writing can "disturb" the "opposition of nature and institution" (44). Writing is typically only associated with the institution of culture, which is to say, with what is properly human. Yet, for Derrida writing itself shows the limitations of such a delimitation since it is only through writing that something like "culture" and "nature" can make any sense. Derrida finds writing everywhere, not just in cultural institutions and conventions but in the "world" itself, in that space seemingly beyond the horizon of the human.

Elaborating on the pervasiveness of writing, Derrida suggested that it is in fact impossible to escape the reach of written inscriptions. Hence Derrida's (1976, 158) oft misunderstood remark: "*There is nothing outside the text*." If there is nothing outside the text, this is not so because phonetic writing is itself all pervasive, nor is it because there are nothing but "texts" in the commonsense notion of the word, but rather because the entire "world" can be understood as a textual weave. Nothing escapes textuality because everything functions as a text—as a scene of various kinds of inscription. Derrida is clear that he is talking not only about phonetic writing but about something much more expansive. For him, "the [written] trace […] is not more *natural* […] than *cultural*, not more physical than psychical, biological than spiritual" (Derrida 1976, 47–48). Traces are all of these things—they are words on the page but also tracks in the dirt, pictures on

paper but also images in the mind, tattoos on bodies but also bodies in the earth. In other words, we should not draw hard distinctions between what can and cannot constitute writing. Rather, the "biological" itself might even be a kind of writing. Moreover, such traces "*are themselves not only human*." (Derrida 1991, 116).

When, in the preceding passage, Serres (2011, 79) suggests that "we free […] the soil from death, corpses, tombs, and cemeteries," he is not simply suggesting that humans ought to engage in other interment practices but, at a more fundamental level, that we stop writing on the earth, that we stop leaving traces behind. His concept of "leasing" indeed suggests this withdrawal from the trace, this retraction of the mark. Yet, from a Derridean perspective, this withdrawal or retraction is impossible since we are embedded within a general economy of writing, a general writing from which we cannot extract ourselves.

Thus, the political and ethical question facing humans is neither whether we will write on the land nor whether we will engage in practices of marking and demarcating, but rather what sorts of traces we will disseminate and with what kinds of force they will exert in the world. For too long, a Western obsession with material immortality has led humans to engage in deathcare practices that not only delay the inevitable but that also do damage to the land-community. Owing to conventional burial practices, massive amounts of resources are buried in the earth: in addition to some 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde, "approximately 30 million board feet of hardwoods, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, 104,272 tons of steel, and 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete" are interred along with human bodies each year in the United States (Harker 2012, 151). These are, I suspect, the kinds of practices Serres had in mind when he called for humans to stop burying our

corpses in the soil, when he advised us to withdraw from the ancient practice of burial. Yet, as Ramsey Creek and other conservation burial grounds demonstrate, burial does not inherently necessitate the massive outpouring of resources and consumption of land that conventional burial demands. What Ramsey Creek designates as conservation burial is not, in fact, a new practice. On the contrary, what counts as conservation, green, or natural burial are practices that have been part of various cultures for centuries (cf. Laqueur 2015). In the United States, then, practices that promote conservation via the body's carnal claim to the land are in the process not only of writing the land differently but also of revising cultural relations to ecology and to death in the image of ancient deathcare practices.

Conservation burial, I have argued, offers both the living and the dead an alternative means of writing on the land. Since we cannot dispose of human bodies without in some sense leaving a trace (cremation not only uses energy but also emits greenhouse gases), conservation burial is a way of writing akin to what Derrida calls "sous rature." By way of analogy, I would like to suggest that conservation burial enables us to write on the land with pencil rather than pen or, better yet, as if with stick in soil instead of chisel on stone. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976) writes in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Derrida often wrote *sous rature* or "under erasure" whenever a word—usually a metaphysical one—seemed inaccurate yet necessary. She explains: "This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)" (xiv). Conservation burial operates by way of a similar movement. Disposing of human remains by way of burial is both "inaccurate" or, for my purposes, unacceptable (in its

conventional guises) but also "necessary." Burial is something we must live with, but we need not accept it naively. Hence, conservation burial acknowledges the troubles with burial and so transforms (or reverts) the practices into something less damaging than it otherwise would be. Moreover, if we conceive of the body itself as a mark, conservation burial renders it erasable. Indeed, decomposition works to erase the body as such. Its remains remain, so to speak, but they do so not in the fixed and stabilized position of a body pumped full of formaldehyde and enclosed in a concrete vault. Rather, the interred bodies of those buried in conservation burial grounds are dispersed throughout the ecosystem and incorporated into other assemblages.

To summarize: carnal claims are performatively enacted when human bodies are buried in ways that enable the energy contained within them to disperse within a land-community. When this happens at places designated as conservation burial grounds, and especially at places where conservation agreements have been entered into, the material traces of the human body function to secure ecological stability and sustainability. The buried body staves off development by infusing the biotic community with fragments of the privileged human corpus, which in many places is legally protected even after it has been interred. With conservation burial, marking the land with human bodies becomes a means not simply of appropriating the land for human use and exploitation but for the whole of the biotic community. This process I have designated as a form of writing on the land which exerts a performative force that impacts upon relationships among human and more-than-human, bringing the heterogeneous actors within those broad categories closer together, initiating an ethical bond.

Rhetorics of Dispersal: Or, the Gift of Death

After Dr. Clark Wang's body is carefully and lovingly lowered into the North Carolina soil, *A Will for the Woods* (Browne et al. 2014) shifts to the ceremony that followed. With notes in hand, a well-dressed man speaks graveside of Clark's life and last wishes. Reminding the mourning crowd of the deceased's close connection with the natural world, the officiant then reads words apparently inscribed by Clark before he died:

> I want my final legacy to be an environmental gift to all beings and all creatures that follow me, not a hazard to the earth. Spiritually, I believe green burial restores us to reusable materials, returning our nutrient signature to the cycle of life rather than being cut off from it.

Echoing both Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Genesis 3:19, Clark's written traces are mobilized to articulate a notion of the human body as a potential "gift," rather than a "hazard," to the earth. Unlike conventional burial, which risks doing further damage to both funeral workers and to the biotic community, Clark posits green burial as a restorative process, one that brings humans into close and necessary contact with the ecosystems to which they belong. Beyond rejecting the resource-intensive practices associated with conventional burial, going green is posited as a means of "returning our nutrient signature" to the larger "cycle of life." The gift of death, then, is one of enrichment rather than degradation, one of sustenance rather than deterioration. And it begins with the trace, with bodily dispersal.

Conceptualizing the human body as a gift is not altogether new, even in Western societies. Indeed, giving bodies for science or for medical purposes is a highly dignified route, which approximately 48 percent of Americans already pursue ("Organ Donation Statistics" n.d.). In the case of organ donation, entire bodies or specific parts might be

used for surgical training (including plastic surgeries), automobile crash testing, and transplants and other vital surgeries, to name just a few (Roach 2003). Making oneself useful after death, while not something everyone chooses or has chosen for them, is, thus, not a totally novel thing to do. Conservation (or "green") burial, as Clark's posthumously voiced words suggest, offers people an additional opportunity to make themselves useful. In their analysis of transformations in British burial practices, Rumble, Troyer, Walter, and Woodthorpe (2014, 244) note that the dead are

> decreasingly being *disposed* of somewhere out of sight in sequestered spaces and are instead increasingly becoming subject to a managed process of *dispersal* into environments inhabited by the living, in which—via ecological and altruistic rhetoric—the dead are positioned as a gift to the living and to the planet.

In the case of conservation burial, however, it is not only other human beings who benefit most or even most directly. Because the placement of human bodies in land designated for interment and especially conservation burial generally protects that area from future development, conservation burial can actually preserve sizable portions of habitat for more-than-human actors, as well as generate green space for human beings.

Thus, conservation burial offers those so inclined to pursue what the radical environmental activist and author Edward Abbey, in a conversation with Jack Loeffler, called " a good death" (Loeffler 1989, 18). Abbey, whose own body was left to the elements in his old sleeping bag on the surface of the desert he so adored, challenged the anthropocentric longing for human immortality: "Which of us is worthy to live forever, eternally? Nobody I know" (17). Immortality, of course, is an impossibility, a dream not yet (and perhaps, hopefully, never) realized. Yet, conventional burial practices promise something akin to immortality—in the form of strong protections against the

deteriorating force of the world. Conventional burials attempt to keep the human body intact (for a while) and from returning to the biotic communities to which they belong. It is a way of cutting the human off from the earth. Undoubtedly conventional burial practices have accrued meanings of their own during the more than 150 years in which they have been exercised. Yet, in the context of increasing ecological awareness, its meaningfulness seems to be changing. Clark's words, given voice by the officiant at his funeral, suggest that giving one's body to the land-community might harbor new forms of meaning for those less intent on preserving their bodies. At the very least, Clark asserts, conservation burial helps to ensure that one's "legacy" is not a "hazard to the earth," a point that no doubt gives comfort to many who opt to be buried in the soil without the trappings of a modern, toxic, and resource-intensive funeral industry. As the Ramsey Creek Preserve website puts it, "Burial is not a waste of land, it protects and restores the land" ("Frequently Asked Questions" n.d.).

Framing conservation burial as a "gift" as opposed to a "hazard" of conventional interment, Clark and other advocates articulate a linkage between this notion of the body as gift and a concept of responsibility. From within the logic of this frame, bequeathing one's body to earth is a means of enacting a form of responsibility, that is, a form of responding to the troubled land-community. In light of this, I shall close with a brief meditation on Derrida's understanding of the gift and of responsibility as a way of drawing out some of the implications of this rhetoric of dispersal. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida (2008, 29) writes that, "there is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodox, rule, or doctrine." Responsibility, in other words, always functions as a departure from the already given,

the taken-for-granted. One cannot properly be responsible if one simply repeats convention.

This is why the sense of responsibility found in Derrida's work is radically detached from deontological ethics, for example. Its operation is in this sense counter-hegemonic to the extent that responsibility breaks with or makes tremble the conventions to which most of us have consented. The modern funeral industry in the United States has temporarily sutured the practices it promotes and proffers with a cultural ideal of deathcare—one that lavishes upon dead bodies a range of services and products that work to prevent the body from decomposing. Practices like embalming and products like expensive caskets and heavy concrete vaults are applied to corpses and framed not only as conventional but also as morally good (Mitford 2000). Conservation burial, on the contrary, breaks with convention and offers a means of embracing rather than denying the fact that someday we will die and decay, becoming part of the land-community in which we have nevertheless always already been enmeshed. Giving one's body over to the land-community in this way rips away the temporary suture that the modern funeral industry has been able to maintain for many years.

In thinking about the "gift," Derrida claims that in order for something to be a gift it must be given without any expectation that the donor will receive something in return. With the gift there can be no *quid pro quo* relationship. If something were to be expected in return, one leaves the realm of the gift and finds oneself back in the realms of exchange and economy. "One must," Derrida (2008, 118) contends, "give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without *thanks* [*remerciement*]: without anything, or at least without an object." The act of giving must exceed the horizon of

economic exchange and calculation. If something is truly to be given, it must be done with no strings attached.

Given that Derrida's concept of the gift remains confined to a specifically human, and therefore economic, context, he finds the gift a near impossibility. Within societies built on exchange, it can be difficult to locate instances where a gift is given without some expectation of repayment. Hence, Derrida suggests it may be better to think of the process of giving rather than the objects themselves. Yet, by thinking about the gift within an ecological rather than economic context (without for a second suggesting that the two can be rigorously distinguished), the possibility of the gift seems slightly nearer. When Clark avers that he wants to "give" his body to the earth as sustenance, as energy, as potential for new life, does he slip the binds of economic exchange? When Clark's body is buried and disperses throughout the land-community, does it give itself over without taking something in return?

Yes and no. On the one hand, it is impossible to extricate humans from their ecological entanglements. Living humans both give and take within the broader ecosystems to which they belong. We may take oxygen, for example, but we also supply carbon dioxide. We are linked to the trees in this way. From this perspective, conservation burial can be seen as a way of giving back to the land-community. On the other hand, a human corpse is perhaps a radically different kind of thing than a living, breathing human. We might say that the corpse can give absolutely with neither hope nor expectation that it will receive anything in return. In some significant sense, the dispersing human body is given over in full, without remainder. As soon as it begins to decompose, it is already something else entirely, becoming radically otherwise as "it"

(and now we must put the ~~human body~~ to which this "it" refers under erasure) diffuses into the ecosystem—into microorganisms and plant life that will be consumed by other animals, which will in turn die and be consumed as well. This is a way of giving over and giving in to the cycle of death and life.

There are, of course, things to be gained whenever conservation burial is chosen. When the human body is placed in the earth within a plot of land designated for conservation burial, it performatively inaugurates a relationship in which the land-community itself is shielded from certain kinds of future human development. This has benefits both for the many kinds of more-than-human actors within the ecosystem who rely upon undeveloped lands for their own survival, but humans also gain: there may be spiritual as well as physical gains. Visiting a conservation burial ground can be healing for grieving families and friends, a welcome alternative to the rows of standard headstones and fake flowers found in many conventional cemeteries. Moreover, however, the entire biotic community gains in the form of the energy added to the land by the nutritive human body.

The performance of a *rhetoric of dispersal* enacted through *bodily appropriation* and framed as a *gift* in the context of conservation burial exceeds providing nutrients to the land-community. This rhetoric of dispersal performatively transforms dynamics in the land-community by recomposing the relationships among human and more-than-human actors. As the human body decomposes underfoot and is absorbed in the ecosystem by other organisms, it rhetorically transfers not only its energy but also its special status to the entirety of the biotic community. Dispersed throughout the ecosystem, the human body works to secure ecological stability and sustainability.

Works Cited

"About." 2016. *Memorial Ecosystem*. Accessed August 25. http://www.memorialecosystems.com/Locations/RamseyCreekPreserve/tabid/58/Default.aspx.

"About the Film." 2016. *A Will for the Woods*. Accessed September 12. http://www.awillforthewoods.com/about/#about-the-film.

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Barnett, Joshua Trey. 2015a. "Fleshy Metamorphosis: Temporal Pedagogies of Transsexual Counterpublics." In *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, edited by Leland G. Spencer and Jamie Capuzza, 155–69. Lanham, MD: Lexington Press.

———. 2015b. "Toxic Portraits: Resisting Multiple Invisibilities in the Environmental Justice Movement." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2): 405–25.

———. 2016. "Politics of Edibility: Reconceptualizing Ecological Relationality." *Environmental Communication*, 1–14.

———. 2017. "Impurities: Thinking Ecologically With *Safe*." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10: Forthcoming.

"Bios." 2016. *Memorial Ecosystems*. Accessed August 28. http://www.memorialecosystems.com/AboutUs/Bios/tabid/109/Default.aspx.

Browne, Amy, Tony Hale, Jeremy Kaplan, and Brian Wilson. 2014. *A Will for the Woods*. Documentary.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

———. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.

———. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

———. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Campbell, Billy. 2013. *Saving One Million Acres for Two Thousand Years*. TEDxGreenville. Greenville, SC. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyA0VLzOPPA.

Carbaugh, Donal. 1999. "'Just Listen': 'Listening' and Landscape Among the Blackfeet." *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (3): 250–70.

Condit, Celeste M. 2013. "Pathos in Criticism: Edwin Black's Communism-as-Cancer Metaphor." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (1): 1–26.

Corbett, Julia B. 2006. *Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages*. Washington, D.C: Island Press.

Cram, Emily Dianne. 2012. "'Angie Was Our Sister:' Witnessing the Trans-Formation of Disgust in the Citizenry of Photography." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 (4): 411–38.

Davies, Douglas J. 2005. *A Brief History of Death*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 1999. "Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36 (1): 9–21.

———. 2001. "Trains in the Wilderness: The Corporate Roots of Environmentalism." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4 (4): 633–52.

———. 2006. "The Speed of Immanent Images: The Dangers of Reading Photographs." In *Visual Communication: Perception, Rhetoric, and Technology*, edited by Diane S. Hope, 79–90. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

———. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

———. 1988. *Limited Inc*. Edited by Gerald Graff. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1991. "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, 96–119. New York: Routledge.

———. 1993. *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

———. 2008. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Edbauer Rice, Jenny. 2008. “The New ‘new’: Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94 (2): 200–212.

“Film Review: *A Will for the Woods*.” 2014. *Film Journal International*. August 15. http://www.filmjournal.com/content/film-review-will-woods.

“Find a Provider.” 2016. *Green Burial Council*. Accessed August 23. https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1Pcse6ri92OlrhYDPr4DxcL_kOyI.

“Frequently Asked Questions.” n.d. *Memorial Ecosystems*. http://memorialecosystems.com/FAQs/tabid/55/Default.aspx.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. 2010. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Gruber, David R. 2014. “The (digital) Majesty of All under Heaven: Affective Constitutive Rhetoric at the Hong Kong Museum of History’s Multi-Media Exhibition of Terracotta Warriors.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44 (2): 148–67.

Gunn, Joshua. 2012. “*Maranatha*.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 (4): 359–85.

Gunn, Joshua, and Jenny Edbauer Rice. 2009. “About Face/Stuttering Discipline.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6 (2): 215–19.

Harker, Alexandra. 2012. “Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial.” *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25 (1): 150–59.

Harold, Christine. 2000. “The Rhetorical Function of the Abject Body: Transgressive Corporeality in ‘Trainspotting.’” *JAC: Journal of Advanced Composition* 20 (4): 865–87.

Harold, Christine, and Kevin Michael DeLuca. 2005. “Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (2): 263–86.

Harold, Christine L. 1999. “Tracking Heroine Chic: The Abject Body Reconfigures the Rational Argument.” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 36: 65–76.

Harris, Mark. 2007. *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. New York: Scribner.

Hawhee, Debra. 2006. “Rhetorics, Bodies, and Everyday Life.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36 (2): 155–64.

Kenigsberg, Ben. 2014. “‘A Will for the Woods,’ a Documentary About Natural Burial.” *The New York Times*, August 14. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/15/movies/a-will-for-the-woods-a-documentary-about-natural-burial.html.

Kohák, Erazim. 1987. *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Landau, Jamie. 2012. "Reproducing and Transgressing Masculinity: A Rhetorical Analysis of Women Interacting With Digital Photographs of Thomas Beatie." *Women's Studies in Communication* 35 (2): 178–203.

———. 2016. "Feeling Rhetorical Critics: Another Affective-Emotional Field Method for Rhetorical Studies." In *Text + Field*, edited by Rob Asen and Karma R. Chávez. State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Laqueur, Thomas W. 2015. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Loeffler, Jack. 1989. *Headed Upstream: Interviews with Iconoclasts*. Harbinger House.

McHendry, George F., Michael K. Middleton, Danielle Endres, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Megan O'Byrne. 2014. "Rhetorical Critic(ism)'s Body: Affect and Fieldwork on a Plane of Immanence." *Southern Communication Journal* 79 (4): 293–310.

McKerrow, Raymie. 1989. "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." *Communication Monographs* 56: 91–111.

McKerrow, Raymie E. 1993. "Critical Rhetoric and the Possibility of the Subject." In *The Critical Turn: Rhetoric and Philosophy in Postmodern Discourse*, edited by Ian Angus and Lenore Langsdorf, 51–67. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Merchant, Carolyn. 1983. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne.

Middleton, Michael, Aaron Hess, Danielle Endres, and Samantha Senda-Cook. 2015. *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Studying Rhetoric in Situ*. New York: Lexington Books.

Middleton, Michael K., Samantha Senda-Cook, and Danielle Endres. 2011. "Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods: Challenges and Tensions." *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (4): 386–406.

Mitford, Jessica. 2000. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Vintage.

Morris, Charles E., and John M. Sloop. 2006. "'What Lips These Lips Have Kissed': Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (1): 1–26.

Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Murray Yang, Michelle. 2011. "Still Burning: Self-Immolation as Photographic Protest." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (1): 1–25.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense." In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, 141–53. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Olson, Philip R. 2014. "Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States." *Science, Technology & Human Values* 39 (5): 666–93.

"Organ Donation Statistics." n.d. *OrganDonor.gov*. http://www.organdonor.gov/statistics-stories/statistics.html.

Ott, Brian L. 2010. "The Visceral Politics of *V for Vendetta*: On Political Affect in Cinema." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27 (1): 39–54.

Ott, Brian L., and Diana Marie Keeling. 2011. "Cinema and Choric Connection: *Lost in Translation* as Sensual Experience." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (4): 363–86.

Pezzullo, Phaedra C. 2003. "Touring 'Cancer Alley,' Louisiana: Performances of Community and Memory for Environmental Justice." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23 (3): 226–52.

———. 2007. *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

———. 2011. "Contextualizing Boycotts and Buycotts: The Impure Politics of Consumer-Based Advocacy in an Age of Global Ecological Crises." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8 (2): 124–45.

Plumwood, Val. 2008. "Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death." *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 5: 69–75.

"Ramsey Creek Gallery." n.d. *Memorial Ecosystems*. http://www.memorialecosystems.com/Locations/WestminsterSC/PhotoGallery/tabid/57/AlbumID/365-12/Default.aspx.

"Ramsey Creek Preserve." 2014. *Upstate Forever*. http://upstateforever.org/portfolios/ramsey-creek-preserve-public/.

Roach, Mary. 2003. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Rogers, Richard A. 1998. "Overcoming the Objectification of Nature in Constitutive Theories: Toward a Transhuman, Materialist Theory of Communication." *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (3): 244–72.

Rumble, Hannah, John Troyer, Tony Walter, and Kate Woodthorpe. 2014. "Disposal or Dispersal? Environmentalism and Final Treatment of the British Dead." *Mortality* 19 (3): 243–60.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schutten, Julie Kalil. 2008. "Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter." *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 2 (2): 193–211.

Seegert, Natasha. 2014. "Play of Sniffication: Coyotes Sing in the Margins." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47 (2): 158–78.

Serres, Michel. 1995. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

———. 2007. *The Parasite*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2011. *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* Translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Smith, Mark J. 1998. *Ecologism: Towards Ecological Citizenship*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1976. "Translator's Preface." In *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, ix – lxxxvii. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Troyer, John. 2007. "Embalmed Vision." *Mortality* 12 (1): 22–47.

Uexküll, Jakob von. 1957. "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds." In *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, translated by Claire H. Schiller. New York,: International University Press.

"Welcome." n.d. *Memorial Ecosystems*. http://www.memorialecosystems.com/.

White, Lynn. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155: 1203–7.

Whitman, Walt. 1855. *Song of Myself*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Zelizer, Barbie. 2010. *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. New York: Oxford University Press.

CHAPTER FOUR

DECOMPOSITION: RHETORICS OF URBAN DIRT-WORK

The chaos of death disturbs the peace of the living. Nothing represents this chaos more forcefully to human senses and the imagination than the biological process of bodily disintegration. This unsettling fact of life has proven to be a rich source of inspiration for human efforts to find order in disorder, meaning in suffering, eternity in finitude.

— Gary Laderman (2003, xv), *Rest in Peace*

Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.

— Mary Douglas (1966, 7), *Purity and Danger*

About 65 miles north of Ramsey Creek Preserve in Cullowhee, North Carolina, on a crisp mountain morning, an observant team of researchers and architects huddles over a raised, lumpy patch of dirt at an outdoor research facility aptly named FOREST. Someone pushes a long metal rod into the earth, taking the soil's temperature and checking moisture levels, while others watch on and nosily sample the air for smells. The earth is warm; the air, piney, slightly putrescent. These researchers are checking compost piles for recent activity. There are no banana peels or apple cores here, though. Inside the

bulging dirt mounds are decomposing human bodies.

In the winter of 2015, the research team covered two donated corpses with wood chips, hoping to better understand how human bodies decay. "To vary the conditions, alfalfa pellets and water were later added to one of the bodies" (Holcombe 2016). Like the bodies buried an hour's drive southeast on the banks of Ramsey Creek, these decomposing corpses were laid into the ground without having been embalmed, placed directly into the earth, lacking any of the trappings of a conventional burial. Inside the piles, carbon-rich materials gradually reduce the body to all but the bones (eventually, those too will wear away). These bodies, like those at nearby natural burial grounds, will be integrated rather than separated from the ecosystem, reincorporated rather than segregated, as they decompose and transform into soil. Through experimentation, the researchers assembled in North Carolina hope to determine the most efficient means of turning a human body into compost. They hope to transform corpses into dirt.

While it is not completely unheard of for human waste to be composted—"*Turn your turds into tomatoes*" one do-it-yourself website exclaims (Shaun 2011)—the idea of composting entire human bodies is a bold, if not controversial, move. This effort is being championed by the Urban Death Project (UDP), which is developing a technical system for composting human remains that it calls "recomposition." Recomposition, according to the UDP, is decomposition that is oriented toward ecological and cultural renewal. Designed as an alternative for urban areas, where land for cemeteries is increasingly sparse, the UDP would provide a means of deathcare that uses very little of the already dwindling land in cities (Berridge 2002; Santora 2010); would challenge the toxic practices associated with conventional embalming and burial; and would transform

longstanding deathcare rituals.

Conceptualized by Seattle-based architect Katrina Spade during a master's program at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, the UDP proposes to "[utilize] the process of composting to safely and gently turn our deceased into soil-building material, creating a meaningful, equitable, and ecological urban alternative to existing options for the disposal of the dead" (Spade 2015a). As Spade (2015b) describes in the *Huffington Post*, "The Urban Death Project has designed a system where bodies are laid into a constantly replenished core filled with wood chips and sawdust, then covered with the same material and gently transformed into compost." In other words, the UDP is developing a human composting system, not all that different from the backyard composters familiar to gardeners or, in fact, to "what's happening on the top six inches of the forest floor, as organic material breaks down to form precious topsoil" (Spade 2015b). At the end of the process, at least according to plans laid out by the UDP, soil from the composting system will emerge from the bottom of the core ready to be used in flower and vegetable gardens throughout the city.

Both the figure and practice of decomposition are at the center of the UDP's efforts to transform deathcare practices in urban areas. As a physical practice, decomposition serves as an ecological alternative to conventional burial, which delays human decay and pollutes the soil, and cremation, which rapidly incinerates the body but returns little if any of its nutrients back to the larger biotic community and pollutes the air. Carefully managed inside the UDP's concrete core, human decomposition will lead to the creation of rich soil that can be put to use throughout the city or taken away by survivors of those whose bodies have been composted. Like natural burial, the UDP

harnesses the productive force of decomposition to generate life-affirming and life-supporting materials from death. The human body-become-soil becomes quite literally the grounds upon which new life might emerge. In this way, decomposition is a means of creative destruction: as the human body decays, it makes possible new forms of life. From mortality, vitality.

As a figure, decomposition serves as a postmodern provocation to rethink both the human and ecological relationality. On the one hand, decomposition pushes us to rethink the human because it refuses to understand the human as a stable, bounded, impermeable being that ought to be preserved at all costs. All organic beings decompose, and so humans must also decompose. Decomposition embraces precisely the malleability and permeability of the human form and harnesses that openness to make new life. Decomposition is an enactment of human "trans-corporeality": our bodies open onto rather than close us off from the outside world (Alaimo 2010). Thus, decomposition also forces us to reconsider ecological relationality insofar as it places humans amidst the messiness of mortal exchange. The UDP invites humans to see our bodies as part of larger cycles of life and death, and thus as irreducibly interdependent and interconnected within broader land-communities. In doing so, decomposition challenges the logic of the boundary. Dualisms of all sorts—life/death, whole/fragment, one/many—are troubled through the process of decomposition, as the lines between seemingly stable categories become blurry and even fall away. Especially when bodies decompose together, as they will in the UDP's composting system, they become indistinguishable one from the other as they enter into another assemblage—dirt. And, as we will soon see, fostering processes where humans become dirt is a means of reordering the world, of transforming the

anthropocentric obsession with body preservation and its concomitant aversion to the abject (in the form of decaying bodies) into a more ecocentric concern with sustainable forms of relation.

Decomposition, I argue, also furnishes significant conceptual resources for rhetorical theory and criticism. As I explain later, constitutive and articulatory theories of rhetoric have exerted considerable force on the field's understanding of how rhetorics function (e.g., Charland 1987; DeLuca 1999). Both the constitutive and articulatory approaches focus mostly on the productive qualities of discourse, that is, on the ways in which rhetorics produce subject positions and establish certain kinds of relationships. Similarly, Bruno Latour's (2010, 473–474) work on composition acknowledges that "things have to be put together […] while retaining their heterogeneity." Constitutive rhetoric, articulation, and composition are all names for the *generative force* of discourse. This tradition recognizes, however, that what is produced by rhetoric is not always desirable. Sometimes the subject positions, relations, and objects made through rhetorical activity need to be taken apart and put to different uses. Decomposition serves in this chapter as a conceptual tool for thinking about what happens when rhetorics exert a deteriorating force in the world, that is, when rhetorics unmake the world as we know it, when they de-compose prior compositions and assemblages. Decomposition, however, is not the same as destruction. It is more akin to what Derrida (1976) calls deconstruction, the doubled act of reversal and displacement, of overturning and of recreating. As anyone who composts knows well, decomposition is a form of creative destruction: as one thing wears away another is made possible. Rhetorically, decomposition names those processes where certain traditions are undone and others are generated in their wake.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I consider the decompositional rhetorical force of the Urban Death Project. Before returning to the conceptual issues raised in the preceding pages, I briefly narrate a history of deathcare practices in urban areas. This background not only situates the specific acts advocated by the UDP in relation to historical practices, but also demonstrates the differences its focus on decomposition makes for our understanding of the relationships among humans and the more-than-human world. Having sketched this background, I then trace the development of constitutive rhetoric as it has played out in the field of rhetorical studies. Although scholars interested in the productive force of rhetoric often mention the deteriorating effects of rhetoric in passing, this function has not yet been thoroughly examined. Thus, in a final theoretical detour, I meditate on the connections among dirt, disorder, and decomposition. These three figures/objects/practices then inform my reading of both the UDP's rhetorical practices as well as media coverage of the project.

I read three sets of textual fragments: the master's thesis in which Spade first developed the idea for the UDP, the project's website, and the popular press coverage the project has received. Spade's (2013) master's thesis lays the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for the UDP and provides crucial background on the rhetorical tactics that permeate both the UDP's official rhetoric as well as the reception it has received in the popular press. Importantly, Spade's thesis became an inventional resource for the publicly circulating texts about the project. The second fragment is the UDP's website, which, I argue, aestheticizes human decomposition by picturing it as a process that is both natural and beautiful. Indeed, the website models the processual, ritual potential of human composting. The website's various modes of visualizing the human composting

process also work to rhetorically curtail the potential "ick" factor viewers might expect to experience when confronting the abject. Nevertheless, the UDP's images productively decompose accepted understandings of the human body as a bounded entity, divisible from the ecosystems it inhabits. The images, in other words, "sneak" a rather radical bodily ontology into an otherwise banal depiction of human decomposition. Finally, an inkling of acceptance for the idea of human composting as an alternative to conventional burials and cremation can be glimpsed in an analysis of the news coverage paid to the UDP. From *The New York Times* to *The Atlantic*, from *Slate* to *People Magazine*, from *The Independent* to *Smithsonian Magazine*, from *TreeHugger* to *The Telegraph*, news coverage of the UDP has expressed both concern and excitement for the human composting system. In exploring media coverage of the project, I show how the UDP's decompositional rhetoric is entering into and transforming public discourses about deathcare practices and ecological politics.

A Very Short Overview of Urban Deathscapes in America

For all their vitality, cities are also places of staggering numbers of deaths. In 2014, for example, on average 404 people died each day in the state of New York alone. By the end of the year, 147,488 people had died in the Empire State ("Annual Report of Vital Statistics" 2016). In Manhattan, only one burial ground—Trinity Cemetery and Mausoleum—reportedly still has space available for new interments (Garrison 2014). All the others have, it seems, reached their carrying capacity. In October 2013, *The New York Times* published a sequence of short articles collectively titled "Too Many Bodies, Too Little Space" in which several experts commented on the future of deathcare in the city.

As Christopher Coutts (2013) put it in his response, “The increasing necessity of conserving space and environmental quality are slowly forcing a paradigm shift away from the ‘coffin in the cemetery’ approach and back to being wrapped in burlap and buried in the woods.” In places such as New York City, where population density and death rates outpace space for conventional burials, alternatives have been and continue to be pursued. Cremation is among the most popular options. This section glances back at urban deathcare practices, setting the stage for a later engagement with the Urban Death Project’s proposed human composting system.

Prior to the American Civil War, deathcare in the United States was mostly a matter of family concern. Whenever someone died, writes the historian Gary Laderman (1996, 39), three practices were undertaken by the family and friends of the deceased: “cosmetic preparation at home, transportation to the grave site, and interment or entombment in a designated place.” It was standard practice for family members to take care of the corpse—to wash it and anoint it with oils, dress it, and ready it for guests who might drop by to see the body; to place it inside a simple wooden coffin they likely would have ordered from a local cabinetmaker; and to carry it to the site of its burial. For the most part, these practices were the same in both the city and the country. The funeral and mortuary industries had not yet solidified into the commonplaces they are today. Whether one lived on the bustling streets of an urban center or on a sleepy road in a country town, “death in early America retained for most of its citizens a largely spare, earthy, and family-centered focus” (Harris 2007, 42).

Within urban areas, however, there were often striking differences in how bodies were disposed of. In cities, social hierarchies often determined the path one’s body would

take in the material world of the afterlife. Race and class, for example, impacted the kinds of rituals that were undertaken. “The embellishments of the funeral—the deathbed scene with family and friends, the spectacle of the procession, and the personalized grave—were routinely denied the urban poor” (Laderman 1996, 41). In place of these so called “embellishments,” the bodies of both the poor and African Americans were often disposed of anonymously in graveyards, often in plots containing several other bodies. (Notably, this practice continues today at New York City’s Hart Island, where more than one million people have been buried anonymously in mass graves [Bernstein 2016].) That is, though the urban dead ultimately found a similar fate—burial—how their bodies got there, and with what fanfare and exuberance, could not be taken for granted. Nevertheless, Laderman writes, though some bodies would have been placed within individual or family tombs, “in most cases” the urban dead were simply placed “in the earth underneath ornate markers or monuments” (45). Neither the elaborate casket nor the secure vault had yet been established as a necessary part of burial practices.

Things started to change during the American Civil War, though, as high rates of death rendered embalming standard practice. Family members in faraway cities and towns wanted their dead sons’ bodies returned home in good enough shape for a proper viewing and burial. As embalming became popular, an industry began to accumulate around the human dead. Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, the care of the dead was transferred from the family to a professional class of undertakers, a coterie of corpse handlers proffering products and services at a range of prices to meet the varying needs and desires of surviving family members. Deathcare was handed over nearly *in toto* to such professionals: in addition to cleaning and embalming bodies, undertakers were

called on, and paid, for

> providing ‘services’ at the home, notifying families and guests about the death and funeral, tolling the bell, supplying the pall, placing the corpse in the coffin, carrying the coffin to the hearse and from the hearse to the vault or grave, furnishing a horse or a number of horses for the funeral procession, and digging the grave or opening and closing the tomb. (Laderman 1996, 45)

Though these services were offered in the country as well, cities were an appealing venue for such a business venture since in urban areas, then and now, someone always seems to be dying. Urban areas provided a constant stream of corpses upon which the funeral and mortuary trades could be plied at great expense to the families of the dead and for considerable profit to those professionals selling their products and services (Mitford 2000).

During this period of upheaval and transformation in deathcare practices, the scene of burial shifted as well. Until the mid-1800s, most bodies were buried in churchyards, normally where the deceased had worshipped or where their family attended services. Churches were not only scenes of religious congregation, but also of social gatherings and served as places of reflection on the major stages of life and death. With graves in the churchyard, regular congregants had an at least weekly opportunity to visit their deceased loved ones and to be reminded of their own impending deaths. Over the years, however, churchyards were inundated with dead bodies. As Patricia Finney (2012) notes, “Graves were laid facing east and west, with the head to the west; all available space was used, with burials very close together, and at times on top of each other.” This close proximity of bodies led many to an apparently unsavory but strikingly ecological view of the churchyard: “The buried dead as a giant compost heap was once a commonplace idea,” writes the historian Thomas Laqueur (2015, 222). As churchyards

hit their capacity for burials, and as concerns grew about the hygiene of such burial grounds, interment shifted from the centers of social life to the margins. Thus was born the "rural cemetery movement," which saw cemeteries crop up just outside of urban areas where land was more plentiful and concerns about hygiene were fewer.

Hence, out of the churchyard and into the cemetery did dead bodies go. On the edges of existing cities and towns, modern "lawn cemeteries" were established, often in open fields benefiting from the shade of just a few trees. With graves arranged in neat rows, headstones quickly populated the grassy cemetery grounds, indications that a life was lived and remembered. The new space for the urban dead promised to bring order and cleanliness to the disposal of the dead. No longer would the graveyard resemble a compost pile; the advent of the cemetery ushered in organization, sanitation, and, above all, a departure from the *church's* yard. Whereas the "churchyard was meant to be ancient, to belong to its place," Laqueur (2015, 272) notes, cemeteries "were meant to be radically novel: spaces that broke with historical past to restore an idyllic classical one or to create a marvelous, even utopian future." Dislocated from the confines of the churchyard, the modern cemetery could be expansive. With seemingly never-ending space for additional bodies, every person could have their own plot of land, promised to them into perpetuity—for a fee. This view of the cemetery as a final, permanent resting place for the dead remains mostly intact today.

The modern cemetery has some striking downsides from an ecological perspective. As noted in Chapter Three, the now-conventional American cemetery has become an underground storehouse for millions of gallons of toxic chemicals and tons of wood, metal, and concrete (Olson 2014). Aboveground, the pedicured lawns are often

decorated with non-native species or, in a gesture of longitudinal commitment or relinquishment, faux floral arrangements. Fake flowers last longer because they do not decompose. As Katrina Spade (2013) notes in her master's thesis, the modern cemetery is an ultimately unsustainable part of contemporary deathcare practices. Committing a piece of land to a single person's decomposing corpse for eternity not only means that the earth will continue to be filled with more funereal materials but also that, eventually, land for burials will become excessively expensive or altogether unavailable. In many American cities, space is already running low for new interments (Berridge 2002) and burial plots can easily cost $2,000 or more depending on the location. Responding to the dwindling room in urban cemeteries and bolstered by an increasing awareness of environmental crises and the important role that human beings play in transforming ecological relations, the UDP proposes to create an alternative to the modern cemetery. This entails, as the next two sections demonstrate, rhetorically decomposing these historically significant burial practices.

Productive Rhetorics: Making Things With Words

Rhetoric is often touted as a productive art. Rather than re-presenting the world, rhetorics bring worlds into being. In recent decades discussions of subjectivity within the field of rhetoric have largely centered on the discursive production and maintenance of subject positions. Setting out with Kenneth Burke's (1950) notion of "identification" and Louis Althusser's (1971) idea of "interpellation," rhetorical theorist Maurice Charland (1987, 134) developed the concept of "constitutive rhetoric"—at its most basic, a form of rhetoric that "calls its audience into being." Constitutive rhetoric begs the chicken-or-egg

question: which comes first, audience or rhetoric? Understanding rhetoric not as persuasion but as identification, Charland posits that at least some rhetorics function to conjure an audience. Much as Michael Calvin McGee (1975) argued that "the people" is a political myth created and sustained by rhetoric but with real consequences, so Charland suggested that constitutive rhetorics both call subject positions into being and exert real force on them once they have been established. Such rhetorics invite people to identify themselves in and with an ideological discourse. In recognizing oneself in the address of another, a person is transformed into a subject of that ideological apparatus. Herein lies the doubled meaning of subject found in Michel Foucault's (1994) work: both subject *of* and subject *to* discourse.

According to Charland (1987), constitutive rhetorics generate three key effects. First, they constitute a "collective subject," or a group of individuals who together recognize themselves in an ideological discourse (139). Charland offers a "White Paper" published by the Quebec government in 1979, which outlined a new political order, as one example of how constitutive rhetorics function to create such a collective subject. The Quebec government's "White Paper" established the *peuple Québécois* by asserting the *prior existence* of such a people, that is, by narrating a history of such a *peuple* and inviting audiences to identify with this history. This historical narrative produces a second effect: the constitution of a "transhistorical subject" (140), which is to say, a subject that seems to transcend political contingencies. By narrating the history of the collective subject it simultaneously calls into being, constitutive rhetorics invite people to recognize themselves in an ongoing story. In Quebec, the "White Paper" traced an ancestral lineage and asserted that those living in the province are both heirs to and part

of this long history. This leads to a third effect: constitutive rhetorics also create an "illusion of freedom" (141). Within the narrative of a constitutive rhetoric, subjects are positioned as agents with the capacity to move and act freely. Yet, as Charland notes, because the narrative has already in some sense been written, freedom is an illusion, an already inscribed and delimited form of "freedom," not the kind of freedom associated with free will. As these three effects illustrate, constitutive rhetorics are not simply representational but also ontological. Constitutive rhetorics do not merely refer to a pre-constituted world; they compose worlds and subjects as they disseminate.

The constitutive approach to rhetoric has proven productive for a number of rhetorical scholars interested in the creation of subject positions. Several thinkers have applied Charland's concept to additional case studies, thus demonstrating how different subjects have been produced by various rhetorical practices (Gruber 2014; Hayden 2011; Stein 2002; Sweet and McCue-Enser 2010). Other thinkers have riffed off of Charland's opening movement to extend our theoretical understanding of rhetoric's potential constitutive force. As Charland (1987) notes, not all (or even most) constitutive rhetorics are successful. Picking up on this point, Helen Tate (2005) and Kenneth Zagacki (2007) attend to examples of "failed" constitutive rhetorics in the contexts of feminism and U.S.-Iraq relations, respectively. Tending to another of Charland's minor points—namely, that any act of positive identification necessarily entails negative identification—Robert Mills (2014) explores the ways in which sovereignty is also constituted over and against its others, the figure of the "pirate" being key among them.

Pushing against Charland's impulse toward the productive aspects of rhetoric, Michael Vicaro (2016, 334) examines the "deconstitutive" force of rhetoric, tracing

instances in which rhetoric "undermines or dismantles the existing legal and/or political status of those to whom it refers." As Vicaro demonstrates, rhetorics are not always enrolled to create subject positions with which audiences identify; in some cases, constitutive rhetorics actually retract certain elements of subjectivity without the consent or identification of the people they refer to. Vicaro conceptually clarifies the power of language not to invent but to destabilize identities. If the force of constitutive rhetorics hinges on an audiences' willingness to locate themselves within a discursive regime as a certain kind of person, deconstitutive rhetorics operate without the consent of those to whom they refer. Examining the rhetoric of both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidential administrations during the global "War on Terror," Vicaro argues that many of their legal gestures had as their "aim" and "effect" the "destruction, rather than the constitution, of heretofore legally recognized identities—a deconstitution of political and legal identity that, notably, is not dependent on the addressee's investment or consent" (335). As Vicaro demonstrates, rhetoric is not simply productive; rhetorics also sometimes undo relationships, destabilize subject positions, and deteriorate the status of political actors.

Like the constitutive approach to rhetoric advanced by Charland and others, the turn to articulation in rhetorical theory is concerned with how discourse is enrolled to generate social realities. Drawing on the work of social theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Kevin DeLuca (1999) proposes a "detour" through articulation as a way to supplement rhetorical theory's understanding of and relation to subjectivity. "Articulation," he writes, "has two aspects: speaking forth elements and linking elements" (335). Elements "preexist articulation as

floating signifiers," but are put together in the process of "speaking forth" (335). A way of connecting elements to one another to create something new, articulation describes the discursive creation of social reality. Elements might be articulated into something called "Marxism" or "capitalism," "environmentalism" or "deep ecology." Having linked different elements into a "temporary unity" (335), these articulations make sense of the world in different ways and thus partake in a "struggle to fix meanings and define reality temporarily" (334). Like constitutive rhetoric, articulation is a process of rhetorically producing positions from which subjects experience the world.

Since articulation is a name for the struggle to define social reality, there are always competing discursive operations at work. Social realities rub against one another. Thus, just as social realities can be articulated, so too can they be re- or disarticulated. Disarticulation is a process of delinking elements that had previously been joined together in a discursive formation. Recently, Leland Spencer and Joshua Trey Barnett (2016) emphasized the rhetorical process of disarticulation in a study of mainstream media coverage of the Soulforce Equality Ride, which functioned to delink queerness from Christianity. Whereas members of Soulforce work to articulate a "queer Christian" subject position through protest work, face-to-face meetings with students and faculty at Christian colleges and universities, and blogging (Spencer and Barnett 2013), much media coverage of the activist organization implicitly or explicitly subverts that articulatory process by making queerness and Christianity seem incommensurable. This struggle exposes "the profoundly discursive grounds upon which any politics must proceed" (Spencer and Barnett 2016, 155). As this example suggests, disarticulation can be a means of propping up hegemony. Yet, as the remainder of this chapter will

demonstrate, disarticulating elements can also support counter-hegemonic forms of activism.

I would like to point to one final theoretical example that demonstrates the linkages between rhetoric and the production of subjectivity and social reality. On the edge of the field of rhetorical theory sits Latour (2010) with his perhaps more expansive notion of "composition," which encompasses not just the production of subjects but also of objects. Latour's sense of composition reminds us that "things have to be put together […] while retaining their heterogeneity" (474). Bypassing the question of whether something, including subjectivity, is rhetorically constructed, Latour's notion of composition "draws attention away from the irrelevant difference between what is constructed and what is not constructed, toward the crucial difference between what is *well* or *badly* constructed, *well* or *badly* composed" (474). Composition—how things are formed from heterogeneous materials—is rhetorical through and through, and Latour's emphasis on whether something is "*well* or *badly* composed" invites rhetorical scholars to think not only about how texts are made but also about what they do, what force they exert in the world, and how they might be changed.

Just as Charland (1987) and DeLuca (1999) acknowledge that constitutive rhetorics and discursive articulations can be undone, Latour recognizes as well that compositions are never permanent. As Latour (2010, 478) put it, composition culls together both "immanence *and* truth" into the same approach, noting that although "nothing is beyond dispute […] closure has to be achieved." As such, a compositionist sees things as provisional gatherings, which are always open to re- and decomposition. "What is to be composed may, at any point," Latour writes, "be *de*composed" (474).

While composition highlights the contingency of any given phenomenon it also attends to the relative duration that a concept, practice, or fact enjoys. Compositionism oscillates between deconstruction and defense by enabling scholars to show how, on the one hand, things are made in messy entanglements and, on the other, why some things enjoy more or less stability depending precisely on their composition. As this chapter deals with the decomposition of longstanding and deep-seated deathcare rituals, I turn now from the productive force of rhetoric to its role in undoing troubling relations.

Dirt, Disorder, Disgust, Decomposition

Dirt is a central figure in the UDP's decompositional rhetoric, and for good reason. In the introduction to *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) outlines the instrumental and expressive functions of what she calls "pollution ideas," belief systems maintained by particular societies to both organize and give meaning to disparate, heterogeneous elements that nevertheless come into contact with one another. The instrumental force of pollution ideas, Douglas claimed, ensures that "certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion" (4). By symbolically separating the pure from the impure, the clean from the unclean, the benign from the threatening, pollution ideas shape whether and how different kinds of elements interact. Since the end of the American Civil War, as noted above and reiterated by Laqueur (2015), a large portion of the American populace has been persuaded by the idea that dead human bodies ought not come into contact with the soil for risk of cross-contamination: not only might soil destroy the flesh, we are told, but the flesh might also dirty the soil with disease. Maintained by the funeral industry, this idea has forcefully

shaped the deathcare choices of hundreds of millions of people to the tune of multibillion-dollar annual profits (Harris 2007; Mitford 2000). Demands to embalm, calls for heavy coffins, requirements for concrete vaults: these are some effects of pollution ideas that function instrumentally to keep things separate, to keep the body out of the damp earth, and to ensure the purity of nature and culture.

Pollution ideas work as well on an expressive level, which is to say that they not only function as limits on action but on thought, too. They have a rhetorical force that impinges on the way we think about our bodies and our relationships with other objects, places, chemicals, and bodies. These pollution ideas regulate our beliefs and invite us to see certain relationships as benign and others as dangerous. As Douglas (1966, 4) put it, "the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load" and, thus, "are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order." In all cultures, ideas about the clean and the dirty, the pure and the impure, and the safe and the risky disseminate with consequences. Claiming that something is clean welcomes and encourages contact; on the contrary, claiming that something is dirty warrants distrust and discourages encounters. Drawing distinctions between the polluting and the non-polluting is, thus, a rhetorical process that both reflects and creates values. In the United States, Jim Crow laws exemplify this discursive process: even as the legal rights of African Americans were affirmed, black bodies were framed as dirty and dangerous, something to be avoided. Framing something or someone as dangerous, as a social pollutant, suggests that it or they are less valuable than their more benign counterparts and, additionally, this process reifies arbitrary moral valuations. Thus, pollution ideas, though malleable and historically unstable, powerfully impact upon social relations and

give shape to a culture's contours.

"Dirt" is the name that Douglas gives to that shifting, variegated, and incoherent category of things that a culture defines for a time as polluting and dangerous. One could catalogue specific kinds of dirt in a given culture at a given time and thus have a sense of how that culture operates, what it values, what it abhors, what sorts of relations it fosters and what kinds it repudiates. In such a catalogue one would find all sorts of things: objects (refuse), substances (soil), chemicals (toxic), and animals (wild). People, too, are sometimes cast as pollutants, as the example of Jim Crow laws above demonstrates. Classifying dirt is in some significant sense a question of policing the domestic sphere. Cross thresholds and the catalogue changes. What is safe in one home, one culture, could be dangerous in another. Douglas (1966, 44) writes, "Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements." Thus, whatever is rejected becomes dirt(y): excluded from the realm of the clean and pure, the good and benign, rejected elements function as negative terms in endless chains of symbolic-material orderings. Dirt is what is left over, the excremental remains, when people set about developing systems and structures: it accumulates wherever order is imposed.

Dirt is also disarray. Once polluting ideas are established, dirt offends against the purity to which it has been opposed. "As we know it," Douglas (1966, 2) contends, "dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder." Dirt haunts the background, giving shape to the foreground. Dirt is the messy canvas upon which a figure appears, the necessarily chaotic darkness from which light emerges. In Derridean terms, dirt is the devalued term in hierarchical dichotomies: what

writing is to speech, what the body is to the mind, what animals are to humans, what nature is to culture, et cetera. Such dichotomies, as Derrida (1976; 1982; 2008) teaches us, are arbitrarily imposed and support power relationships that privilege one term over another. As disarray and disorder, dirt defines the contours of the clean, the pure, the benign, and, ultimately, the good. From it, order emerges: out of chaos, clarity. Hence the strong attraction cross-culturally to various forms of pollution ideas. As Derrida (1981) makes clear, however, we should be suspicious any time one term is privileged over another, any time one thing is framed as more pure or more originary.

Pervasive, actual dirt is everywhere and inescapable. Though moved to the margins, brushed out of sight, cleansed from domestic space, dirt nevertheless permeates everyday life. "Dirt, soil, earth, and dust," Heather Sullivan (2012, 515) notes, "surround us at all scales: we find them on our shoes, bodies, and computer screens; in fields and forests, floating in the air." It comes into our homes on the bottoms of our shoes, gets lodged under our fingernails, and discolors our clothing, but dirt also provides the firm ground upon which we move, provides nutrients for the foods we consume, filters the water that we drink, and nourishes a rich biotic community that normally remains out of sight and out of mind. Without dirt, there can be no life: none of us could survive without the vital soil. Actual dirt is an essential if enigmatic component of earthly coexistence. Dirt is also, in one way or another, that to which our bodies will eventually return. Dirt is the traditional resting place of human corpses, a place where human and more-than-human mingle in the production of mortal assemblages.

The relationship between dirt and corpses drives the UDP's decompositional rhetoric. The corpse is precisely that which returns to dirt, becomes dirt, through the

process of decomposition. The corpse is, thus, dirt-y. And, in this way, the corpse is disgusting; it brings the beholder into intimate contact with the absolute other of the living, breathing human body. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is useful for understanding how corpses contaminate our sense of self by decomposing the border between subject and object. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva (1982, 2) defines the abject as that which is

> radically excluded and [that] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. [...] Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.

The abject is, then, what is cast out and evades meaning precisely in its movement away from the more comfortable scenes of subjectivity and objectivity. Neither subject nor object, both of which take on meanings, the abject defies conventional categorizations and refuses to make sense. How to classify the film that settles on the surface of warm milk, the acrid smell of decay, or the sight of rotting human flesh? These things provoke feelings of disgust, acts of repulsion, and sometimes even violent bodily convulsions in the form of vomiting, spitting, choking, or physically withdrawing. In response, we repel such abject things, move away from them, reject them. In doing so, in differentiating ourselves from the abject, we make ourselves. In other words, by casting certain things out, by repressing them in a primitive way, we become what we are.

Human corpses become in Kristeva's work the exemplary form of the abject. Corpses are what we cannot tolerate as mortal beings: "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper [fallen heavily], is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as the fragile and fallacious chance" (Kristeva 1982, 3). The corpse upsets because it is that which we cannot become

while still retaining the "who" of what we are. Corpses cannot, in other words, be assimilated. Encountering a corpse always entails making contact with the abject, coming into close proximity with that which we must thrust aside, ignore, forget, refuse. This is so because, as Kristeva contends, the corpse pushes us to our limits as mortal beings, to the border of what it means to be the kind of beings that we are. The corpse is finitude incarnate: *the body of the dead*. Importantly, this encounter with the corpse is marked not by meaning but by force:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (3)

In distinguishing signification from demonstration, Kristeva crucially highlights the difference between encountering a re-presentation of death and death itself, embodied here by the cadaver. The "flat encephalograph" signifies death in the form of linear movements—flatness denotes a lack of brain activity. In encountering this graphic representation of (a lack of) brain activity, we understand a body as living or dead. It rationalizes the encounter with death. In encountering a corpse, however, we confront in the fallen body not a sign or symbol of death but death itself.

Corpses are, thus, a form of dirt in Douglas's (1966) sense. We cast them out, banish them from view, avoid dealing with them, and, perhaps most of all, abstain from smelling them, precisely in order that we might understand ourselves as vital beings. "It is thus not," Kristeva (1982, 4) writes, "lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.

The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." That is, corpses are rejected not because they are in fact dirty but because they offend against order. Corpses unsettle boundaries between the living and the dead by exposing in the cadaver the ways in which death already inhabits life. Kristeva continues:

> In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. (4)

Such encounters with that "compelling, raw, insolent thing," the corpse, are themselves abjected because they open onto the possibility that we might recognize in the body of the dead something of ourselves. Corpses remind us of our mortal materiality, that we are finite creatures destined to become cadavers ourselves, that our bodies, too, will fall and become otherwise. Avoiding corpses is a form of what, in Chapter One, I called death denial, a form of repression in which mortality itself is avoided. Yet, Kristeva contends, abjection

> is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible [death] constitutes its very *being*; that it is none other than abject. (5)

We are what we detest, what we thrust aside. The very thing we cannot assimilate, the very border we cannot cross, we already are (becoming). We understand, as Derrida (1993) writes, only from our mortality.

Whereas encountering corpses pushes us to our limits as mortal beings, forcing us to confront our own mortality, dirt brings us to the brink of our materiality by promising to decompose even our cadavers. Dirt decomposes boundaries, not least of which is the line between life and death. Dirt is deconstructive, reminding us that the boundaries

between the pure and the impure are fallible, that the relationship between the inside and the outside is porous, that the human subject is irreducibly enmeshed in ecosystems, that relations are made and remade in strange assemblages, that life and death cannot easily be separated. Thinking through some of these dirty lessons, Sullivan (2012, 515) proposes "'dirt theory' as an antidote to nostalgic views rendering nature a far away and 'clean' site precisely in order to suggest that there is no ultimate boundary between us and nature. We are enmeshed within dirt in its many forms." While Sullivan turns to the appearance of dirt in literature, I consider the relationship between death and dirt as articulated in the UDP's rhetoric as a means of coming closer to an ecological view of both deathcare and human cohabitation of the land-community. Dirt's decompositional force brings us to the brink of several Great Divides and makes it possible not only to peer into the abyss but to challenge the given orders we find in the depths of cultural and ecological relations.

Decomposition has much in common with Derrida's critical practice of deconstruction. These similarities bring out what I find especially interesting about the UDP's efforts to reimagine and remake deathcare practices. For Derrida, deconstruction is a way of reading that simultaneously (a) takes the text seriously as a densely woven and dynamic object, (b) locates within the text a contradiction or blind spot, and (c) produces a displacement of the text's founding assumptions. Thus, deconstruction is both unsettling and generative. As a way of reading, it challenges the undergirding order (the commonsense and unquestioned aspects) of a text but also, rather than simply destroying the text, uses the text to make something new. Decomposition enacts a similar operation. In the soil, organic materials are broken down by microorganisms, fungi, and scavengers.

This organic material is not simply destroyed, however. As it disintegrates, it becomes the condition for the creation of something new. Some organisms depend upon the decomposing body for sustenance. Thus, new life emerges out of death. As one thing wears away, another is born.

Deconstruction proceeds along two lines. First, deconstruction disables dichotomous and hierarchical thinking, the kind of thinking that positions certain entities at odds with one another (human *versus* nature) and proposes that one of the entities is superior to the other (humans are *better than* nature). Although hierarchical dichotomies have guided much philosophical thought, Derrida urges that we dispense with them. For Derrida, differences are always constructed through the general structure of writing, which extends well beyond the practice of writing itself to include all activity. Hence, his celebrated but often misunderstood assertion that, "*There is nothing outside the text*" (Derrida 1976, 158, emphasis in original). In order to realize its full force, Derrida's claim must be understood not as a withdrawal into textuality, but rather as a reminder that the ontological play of differences enacted in texts extends to the world more generally. The constant production of differences at work in texts is also at work in everyday life. For example, the production of the dichotomy between mind and body can be traced through philosophical discourses, with high points in both Plato and Descartes, as well as in everyday life and practice. Thus, the first effect of deconstruction is to make visible the play of differences that is constitutive of "texts" in both the narrow and broad senses of this term.

Deconstruction has as its second effect the production of something new. In addition to making the production of difference visible, deconstruction always leaves

something else in its wake through a process of displacement. Thus, deconstruction is a creative practice, always productive of a new signifying structure. As Derrida (1976, 158) puts it, "To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes." Put another way, deconstruction neither merely reproduces the text along the lines intended by its author(s), nor demystifies a text's real or true meaning, nor gets to the root of a text's origins. For Derrida, all of this is impossible. Deconstruction instead yields a reading of the text against itself, against the signifying structures that are latent within it, and that, therefore, obscure the artificiality of its founding assumptions. It is in this sense that Derrida's (2002) deconstruction of Western philosophy's relation to "the Animal" produces another relation with animals, one characterized not by domination but by simultaneous heterogeneity and response-ability (cf. Haraway 2008). Even the philosopher is utterly transformed in the process: Derrida replaces the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* with "The Animal That Therefore I Am," simultaneously reversing and disintegrating the human/animal dichotomy.

My point in the following pages is not to perform a deconstructive reading of the UDP. Rather, by reading Spade's (2013) master's thesis, the Project's website, and mainstream media coverage of the UDP, I suggest that there is a practical form of deconstruction already at work through the mobilization of the figures of dirt and decomposition. The UDP, in other words, performs a deconstructive operation on the rhetoric of deathcare by highlighting the productivity of decomposition, by reimagining burial as a transient, ephemeral, and generative process, as opposed to a simple endpoint. Harnessing the rhetorical force of decomposition, the UDP de- and recomposes

ecological forms of relationality over and against a facile call for environmental harmony or even the withdrawal of human forces altogether. Human composting generates not harmony but cooperation, not annihilation but creative destruction.

Decomposition, therefore, is at work on at least two levels in the case of the UDP. On one level, the rhetoric surrounding the Project functions to decompose some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about both the (category of the) human and ecosystems. By rhetorically returning the human to cycles of death, decomposition, and life, the UDP challenges forms of human exceptionalism that work to separate the human body from the deteriorating force of the world. Against the dominant deathcare rhetorics of the past 150 years (Mitford 2000), the UDP promotes entanglement rather than sequestration. The rotting corpse functions as a way into forms of entanglement that produce alternative mortal assemblages. On another level, the process of human composting imagined by the UDP also decomposes how we think about environmental activism. Rather than simply making something new, human composting radically unmakes one kind of thing in order to make space for another. Thus, human composting disrupts the never-ending cycles of production and consumption. In response to massive human consumption, human composting recognizes the potential energy in human bodies that is typically diverted from ecosystems. Its force is rooted in an understanding of decomposition as essential, inevitable, cyclical, and collaborative. As the human body decomposes, it enters into alternative consumptive streams: it becomes useful in the production of new soil material, thus making new life possible.

Composting has a history in ecological activism. Some have used composting as a means of intervening in the world. As environmental communication scholars Janet

Donoghue and Alison Fisher (2008, 232) compellingly explain:

> Compost is movement. It requires action to elicit the transformative process in either decomposing or nurturing. It requires collecting, emptying, turning and spreading. Compost stagnates. It just sits in the kitchen and sometimes the banana peel looks just like it did the day before, perhaps just a little browner. Compost is slow and inconvenient. It is incremental and you have to be methodical at the expense of convenience. Compost is transformation. A banana peel becomes fuel for a tomato plant. Compost is hard work. It requires daily commitment. Compost is gratifyingly radical. The same nutrients that nurture us also nurture the soil we use, denying the landfill, disrupting the norm. Compost is rich. Gardeners call it liquid gold. Compost is simple. Use your kitchen waste with yard clippings and produce the best possible fertilizer. Compost is complex. It is amorphous in nature; everything decays in its own time. Compost is personal. Its ingredients have all been touched by our hands if not used by our body. Compost is political. It is a system. Sometimes it is slippery or dirty, but it can have huge potential. Compost is good for the environment. It reduces waste, landfill space, and CO_2. The soil utilizes carbon in a way that the atmosphere can no longer hold. Compost is postmodern. It is composed of many things, defying science to duplicate it in the exact way. Compost is modern. The instructions are simple. Compost is death, forcing us to face the inevitability of our own decay. Compost is life. It is living matter that nurtures and purposefully encourages other living matter. It is generational, simultaneously dying and thriving.

As Donoghue and Fisher make clear, composting is a transformative process. It troubles many of the conceptual distinctions inherent in human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. In the next three sections, I look closely at the ways in which decomposition and dirt figure in the rhetoric of the UDP, as well as at how mainstream media are grappling with this nonanthropocentric intervention into deathcare practices and ecological politics.

Groundwork: Cultivating Ground for Human Composting

Articulating composting as "dying and thriving," as Donoghue and Fisher put it, is at the core the Urban Death Project's efforts to recompose deathcare practices. While

studying architecture at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Spade wrote a master's thesis on the challenges faced by the "urban dead," which culminated in the initial proposal for the UDP. Spade's (2013) thesis, "Of Dirt and Decomposition: Proposing a Resting Place for the Urban Dead," rhetorically shifts the ground upon which readers might think about and respond to death, decomposition, and the land-communities in which they are enmeshed. "There is a design solution," she writes, "which would bring the cycles of nature into the city in a deep and meaningful way, so much so that to end up there would be divine" (4). The thesis works up to offering human composting as a "design solution," grappling in the process with issues such as dirt's essential role in ecosystems, the fear of bodily decay, and ecology's place within the cityscape. Since Spade's thesis offers a theoretical justification for the project, and since journalists writing about the project often cite it, it provides access to the kind of conceptual labor involved in reimagining the world that normally passes out of sight. It is precisely to this groundwork—the rhetorical cultivation of new ground, new conditions of possibility—that I now turn.

The "ground" is often invoked to suggest that certain kinds of action and inaction are made more and less possible depending on where one finds oneself, that is, on the specific contours of one's social location. In her thesis, Spade invites readers to consider the ground beneath their feet as a vital starting point for rethinking death, dying, and ecology. "Needless to say," Spade (2013) says anyways, "without dirt, humans wouldn't exist. Everything we depend on—from our food to our building foundations to the microbes in our guts—comes from this incredible stuff" (5). Dirt is the ground upon which we walk, a fundamental element in the human experience, but it also is the

foundation of various networks that sustain biological, social, and economic life. This should be common knowledge ("Needless to say…"), yet it must be said, recalled, reinforced in order to make sense as a point of departure for action. By saying what need not be said, Spade reminds readers to remember what they already know but have presumably forgotten—that the ground upon which they tread is not merely metaphorical. Spade reminds readers, as Abram (1996, 273) puts it, "to feel the soil beneath the pavement." Dirt is transformed from the banal to the extraordinary, from the taken-for-granted to the "incredible." We walk on the ground, to be sure, but we also "depend" upon it in ways that point to our inextricable interconnectedness within the ecosystems to which we belong.

This earthen ground must be defended since, as Spade (2013, 5) contends, "we are violently mistreating the dirt beneath our feet through our agricultural, logging and development methods." Indeed, for Spade, the way humans treat soil is symptomatic of broader forms of mistreatment that extend to entire ecosystems. "This is not the place to make the claim," she notes, "that humans continue to destroy the world around us; we will take that for granted here" (5). Spade thus reverses what can be presumed: of course humans are violently mistreating the earth. What cannot be presumed, however, is the ground upon which this abuse occurs. Dirt is not the inanimate *a priori* of life, but is itself lively. "An acre of soil may contain up to 900 pounds of earthworms, 2400 pounds of fungi, 1500 pounds of bacteria, 133 pounds of protozoa, and 890 pounds of arthropods and algae," she writes (6). Far from being merely anything, soil is full of life. By demonstrating how dirt is earth's "living breathing skin," Spade begins to cultivate a reason for its defense (5). As Judith Butler (2009, 25) argues, since life is "by definition

precarious" it must be cared for, tended to, taken seriously. By infusing dirt with vitality, Spade brings dirt into the realm of the living and so places it within the ethical domain. If dirt is living, she argues, this may be reason enough to care for it.

And yet, however lively dirt may be, it is also where decay and decomposition occur. No matter what else dirt may be, it is where dead things go to rot. This poses a problem for defending and embracing dirt because, as Spade (2013, 10–11) points out, "our society is deathly afraid of decay." Or, to put it differently, many people are deathly afraid of death itself, which is inextricably linked to decay and decomposition. Since it is linked with death, dirt disgusts. We abject it. We develop all sorts of technologies and techniques to avoid dirt: brooms, vacuums, paved streets, sidewalks, and ground coverings are each examples of the ways that we try to overcome dirt. Contemporary Western burial practices also materially attest to our aversion to dirt and its effects on the human body. As Val Plumwood (1999) writes, "the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent any other things from digging us up, keeps the Western human body from becoming food for other species." This fear of dirt, which is also a fear of death, is grounded in the idea that wholeness, unity, and continuity are universal goods, that even dead human corpses ought to be preserved from the deteriorating effects of the earth for as long as possible. Indeed, as Douglas (1966, 2) has argued, "Dirt offends against order." It is the ordering of the pure (the human) and the impure (the natural) that is at stake in burial practices. While Spade admits that humans' fear of decay "makes sense," since they "remind us of death," she also cautions that, "our reaction to this fear is definitely not natural" (14). Indeed, worrying about decay "leads us to create all sorts of chemicals, plastics, and

polymers to keep things from falling down or getting stinky" (14). Precisely because dirt is synonymous with decay and decomposition, Spade contends, cultural practices attempt to bring order to what is inherently disorderly. Put differently, deathcare practices are a means of dealing with the doubly abjected: dirt and corpses. Conventional burial manages the abject, keeps it at a distance from survivors, tempers it, makes it palatable by keeping it out of sight and out of mind. Is it any wonder that funeral workers cover the broken earth with AstroTurf?

Dirt causes so much concern and evokes so much effort because it is the locus where the living and the dead comingle, a space wherein humans and nature cannot help but impinge upon one another. Dirt blurs boundaries; dirt is messy. In her thesis Spade reconciles these issues by placing death and decomposition within broader natural cycles and arguing for an embrace, rather than a rejection, of what those cycles mean for humans. "Embalming and casketing practices," she contends, "are specifically formulated to *defend against natural processes which are ultimately inevitable*" (2013, 15, emphasis mine). Challenging human dominance over nature and natural processes, Spade instead works to incorporate humans into inevitable cycles that are bound to happen no matter how hard humans try to stop them. As Julie Schutten (2008, 209) avers, "Moving to an ethic of environmental sustainability involves considerable relinquishing of control and a heightened vulnerability of humans to other-than-human forces." Embracing an ecological perspective implies, in other words, giving up the ideals of purity that drive humans to forestall the inevitable—decomposition. To highlight this point, Spade compares her own embrace of decay to modern burial practices, which rely on embalming fluids to preserve dead bodies: "as nonsensical as the processes sound, they

are *preferred* by many to the idea of a loved one decomposing; our society's fear of decay is that deep" (15). The physical and metaphorical messiness of decomposition will eventually win out, Spade argues, yet embracing the disorderliness of decomposition remains a key challenge for ecological politics. It is a question of displacing the feelings of disgust with which we so typically confront (the idea of) rotting corpses.

Politically, the UDP's embrace of decomposition also works against current corporate-driven models of disposing our deceased. To be sure, the UDP does not avoid commodification altogether, but it does shift the grounds on which death practices are carried out. Spade demonstrates the difference by critiquing the funeral industry in the United States, which is predicated on modes of burial that harm both the earth and funeral workers in its efforts to preserve the human body. As Spade (2013, 14–15) argues,

> Embalming fluid is comprised primarily of formaldehyde, which has been proven to cause cancer, and although manufacturers have started marketing embalming fluids that are less toxic, the funeral industry has deemed these products to be less effective overall and avoided their use.

By forestalling decay and decomposition, that is, the funeral industry inevitably disseminates toxins for the sake of making dead human bodies look alive, a process that dates back to the American Civil War (Spade 2013, 14). Still, Spade suggests that there are other reasons to be skeptical of the funeral industry's practices. "Casket choice," she argues, "further illustrates our society's fear of decay, and the irrational notion that we might prevent our bodies from it […] the more you pay, the more protected your loved one will be" (15-16). Given Western aversion to decay, it is not surprising that people pay between $500 and $10,000 for such caskets. Moreover, Spade notes, "The process of embalming has taken the task of dealing with dead bodies away from the families of the deceased, and turned it over to an $11 billion funeral industry" (16). By turning death

practices into primarily a commodity, and by wresting control over dead bodies from ordinary people, the funeral industry generates boundaries between the living and the dead, supports the idea that death and decomposition can be managed (read: forestalled) through ever more advanced technologies, and reaps enormous financial benefits from those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. From this perspective, the modern funeral industry is a complex assemblage of practices that negotiate our relationships with the abject. Professional undertakers bear the burden of intimately grappling with corpses, of placing bodies into the earth, so that the rest of us will not have to.

Radically relinquishing control over the human body, Spade advances human composting as a tactical response to the ecological and spatial challenges posed by the urban dead. Human composting is thus positioned as an ecologically sensitive response to traditional burials that, Spade notes, "actually harm the earth" (21). Indeed, whereas conventional burial, including embalming the corpse, tends to be thought of as more sterile than natural burials, Spade paints a different picture:

> At six feet under, the decomposition of the body is slowed by a lack of microorganisms (which live primarily towards the surface of the soil). Couple that with an air-tight casket and a few gallons of formaldehyde, and the end result (it may take a few years, but rest assured it will happen), is not rich organic material but rather a soup of putrefied toxic liquid. (21)

Having turned conventional burials into a grotesque process (who among us wants to imagine their loved one becoming a "soup of putrefied toxic liquid"?), Spade offers natural burials as a more desirable comparison case. Spade frames conventional burial as a disgusting process, one that leads not to the preservation of the body but, rather, to the slow but inevitable fate of becoming "toxic liquid." In a natural burial by contrast, "The physical remains are taken in [by the earth] as nourishment for this tree, or that grove of

wildflowers, and when those plants die back they too will become nourishment for another" (22). The ecological perspective offered by Spade adheres to what Philip Olson (2014, 677) calls the "nutritive conception of the dead body," in which the human body is seen as fodder for the ecosystem. Even if it does not completely overcome our cultural aversion to corpses and decomposition, it suggests that natural burial is at least *less disgusting* than what happens in funeral homes and conventional burial grounds. Indeed, by showing the differences in traditional and natural burials in this light, Spade makes decomposition the more desirable option since it turns human remains into nourishment rather than "toxic soup." For city dwellers, the idea of toxins may already be a pressing threat, so nourishing plant life (trees, groves of wildflowers) may appear as welcome additions to the cityscape.

Having introduced readers to the concept of human decomposition, Spade turns explicitly to her proposed process for human composting at the UDP. The first step, she notes, would be both ceremonial and inaugural: "Friends and family 'lay in' the body of the deceased at the top of the core, and cover it with carbon-rich material such as wood chips and sawdust" (2013, 45). Although the UDP facilities would be located in urban centers, the space itself would contain a large "core" of carbon-rich materials not unlike those found on the forest floor. "As the body decomposes," Spade imagines, "it settles lower into the core, and new material and bodies are layered on top" (45). That is, the body slowly becomes indistinguishable from the earth, fully reintegrated as nourishing soil. After 18 months, the human body will have fully decomposed and settled to the bottom of the core, mingling not only with the carbon-rich material but with other bodies as well. Fully decomposed, the new soil would emerge through a passageway at the base

of the core, where loved ones can return to "visit" with the deceased. "This exterior compost space is designed as a place where mourners and visitors may stop and reflect" (45). Moreover, the "compost may also be taken away for use by members of the community, utilized for urban gardens" (45). In other words, the UDP would transform human bodies into rich, soil-building material that would nourish the earth rather than forestall the inevitable, and natural, cycles of decay and decomposition.

To preemptively counter those critics who might deplore the UDP's insistence on human composting for being too vulgar or gross (e.g., Lean 2015), as a too-close encounter with the abject corpse, Spade infuses a spiritual, ceremonial element into the process of decomposition. "The event of death," she writes, "is so grand, so *final*, that it begs ceremony" (19). In her thesis, Spade imagines that friends and loved ones would enter the UDP's interior and ascend up a four-story, slightly inclined ramp that circles around the core in which bodies are decomposing. As they make their ascent, mourners would meet up with the body of the deceased on the third level of the ramp and carry it to the top where they would lay it into the core. "Without romanticizing the past," Spade argues, "it's worth considering how the heart-wrenching acts of cleaning the body, digging a hole in the earth, and lowering the body into the ground, would be an important part of the grieving process" (16). Having lowered their loved one into the core, friends and family would emerge from the core into a "light-filled space" and then descend into the lobby "where a memorial service can be held, a celebration of the loved one's life" (51-52). By constructing a simple ceremony to facilitate grieving and to initiate decomposition, Spade anticipates critiques that human composting is a grotesque aberration, perhaps even reminiscent of the mass burials so associated with war crimes,

Nazism, and genocide. Unlike those mass graves, Spade conceptualizes the UDP as a space where friends and family will lovingly place the deceased into the earth as a final act of solidarity with the ecosystems to which they belong.

As I have suggested in the preceding pages, Spade's thesis rhetorically shifts the ground upon which readers might think about and relate to death, decomposition, and ecological politics. "Among the millions of complicated relationships that make up our cultural experience," Spade argues, "the cycle of birth-death-decomposition-growth is refreshingly straightforward" (56). Spade's thesis cultivates new ground so that readers might embrace, rather than reject, these natural cycles of the earth. By highlighting the ground itself—*dirt*—as an incredible, life-sustaining force this thesis plunges readers into a web of ecological interrelationality that they are nevertheless already a part of. Embracing decomposition, Spade's thesis deconstructs the liberal subject of modernity and replaces it with a bodily assemblage radically open to the world around it, a subject that can sustain, rather than harm, the ecological webs to which it belongs.

Dirt-Work: The Aesthetics of Human Composting

The conceptual groundwork which takes shape in Spade's (2013) thesis becomes an inventional resource for the more publicly visible iterations of the project's decompositional rhetoric, including its website. The UDP's homepage is a key point of entry for people interested in the alternative burial movement and, in particular, the UDP's proposal for human composting. The website's rhetorical force owes to at least two visual tactics that help viewers imagine human decomposition as an ecologically sensitive process that also appeals to a more general human desire to memorialize and

remember the deceased. First, the website presents several speculative images in the form of architectural renderings of the UDP site and interior. These images invite viewers to contemplate the scene and rituals associated with death practices in a new way. In contrast with more familiar visions of bucolic cemeteries, Spade's architectural drawings of the UDP highlight collectivity, movement, and temporality. Second, as viewers scroll down the website, they are confronted with alternating photographs of dirt and flora, which represent the connections among life and death engendered by the UDP. Inscribed with text that verbally links each photograph to the inevitable cycles of birth-death-decomposition-growth, these photographs visualize the processual nature of human composting. Moreover, these images decenter the liberal human subject, individuated one last time at the moment of death, and present instead fragmented ecological elements, organic and inorganic materials that collectively compose the "living breathing skin" of the earth (Spade 2013, 5).

Owing to Spade's background as an architect, the UDP website includes three of the architectural renderings that first appeared in her master's thesis. Designed to help viewers imagine what a building will look like once it is built and inhabited, these renderings are evocative: they invite viewers to imagine something that does not yet, but nevertheless could, exist in a particular place. When viewers first open the UDP's website, they are confronted by a color rendering of the outside of one of the human composting cores (Figure 5). The sharp lines of the building's proposed modernist architecture—steel, concrete, and glass arranged into a characteristically boxy but elegant structure—are softened in the rendering by fluffy white clouds hovering overhead and budding trees flanking each side like living columns. In the courtyard outside the core,

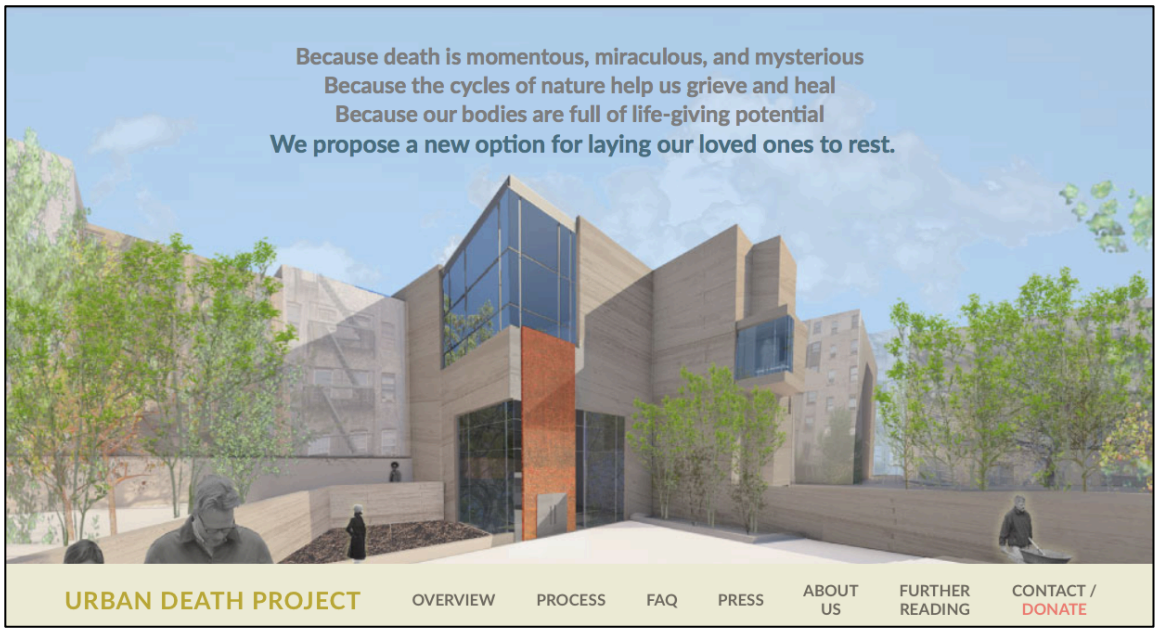

Figure 5 Exterior sketch of recomposition center. Screenshot taken on October 29, 2015, by the author.

photo-realistic (but monochrome) human inhabitants are superimposed onto the computer drawing, which reminds viewers that this is a space for humans in death and in life. Other architectural renderings on the site show the interior of the UDP facility and allude to the process it contains. As users scroll down the website, they next confront a cross-section image of the facility, which shows the scale of the human composter as well as the ramps that lead visitors to the top of the core (Figure 6). Less photo-realistic than the first rendering, Figure 6 invites viewers to ponder the process at work in the UDP's proposal. The schematic nature of this drawing highlights, in other words, the movement of human bodies through this place of decomposition and mourning. The process of mourning is further visualized in a third rendering that appears when viewers scroll still further down the website, which shows black-and-white inhabitants carrying a shrouded body up the ramp that leads to the scene of the laying-in (Figure 7). Together, these

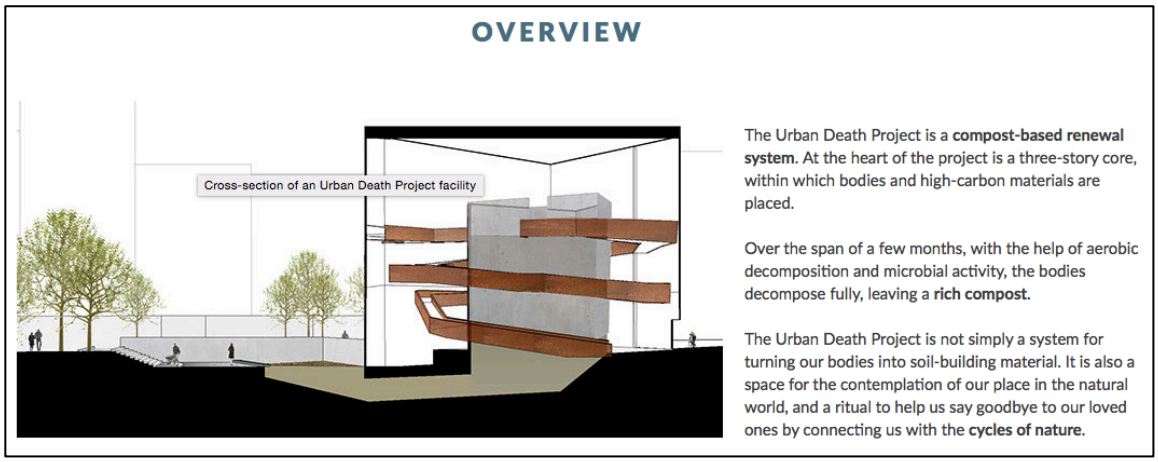

Figure 6 Cross-cut view of recomposition center. Screenshot taken on November 4, 2015, by the author.

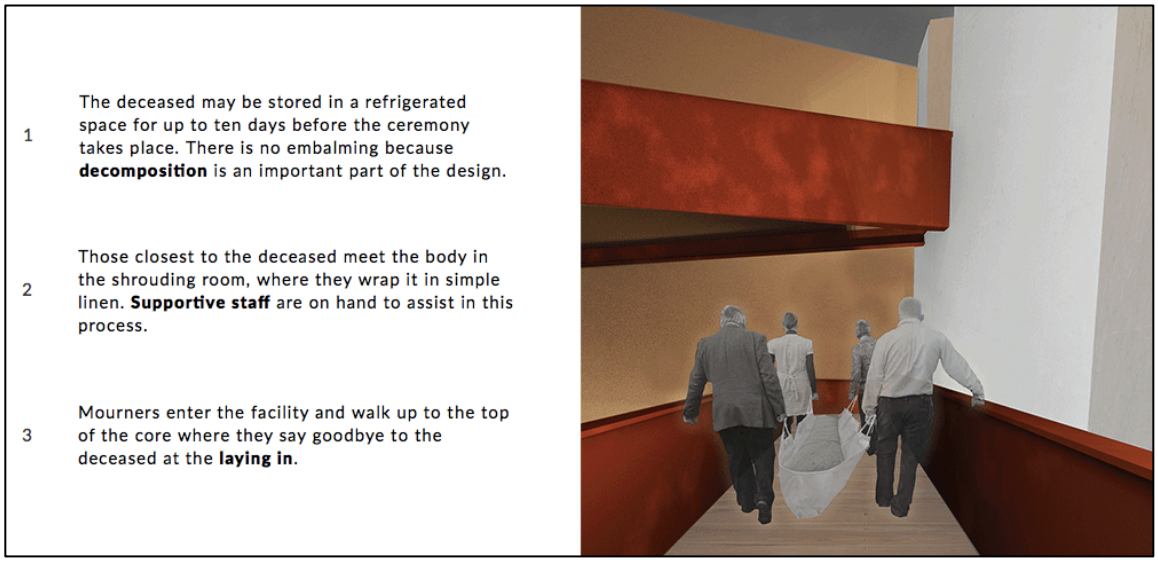

Figure 7 Family transporting corpse within recomposition center. Screenshot taken on November 4, 2015, by the author.

renderings depict the UDP as a scene of collective movement in time.

In Figures 5 and 7, the UDP is pictured as a scene of collective cohabitation and movement. In these images, viewers confront multiple human and more-than-human elements cooperating within the same place. In Figure 5, for example, viewers see at least five different people variously interacting with the UDP structure—one person is walking into the building, another stands near the compost pile outside, two move away from the building together, and a fifth person pushes a wheel-barrow of compost through the outdoor plaza. Like cemeteries and mausoleums, the UDP is pictured as a site where people come together to mourn the dead. Unlike other "resting places," however, the people who visit the UDP do not simply come to contemplate; rather, the UDP is a place where you come to move with others. The person pushing the wheelbarrow through the plaza exemplifies this collective movement in the image by drawing our attention to the ways in which the UDP invites the living to move (with) the dead, to take the compost produced in the process away from the UDP in order to foster new life. As such, the UDP is not so much a "final resting ground" as it is a space of transformation. Yet, as Figure 7 shows, the UDP is also a scene of more conventional modes of collective movement in relation to death practices. In that image, viewers encounter a scene inside the UDP structure in which loved ones carry a shrouded body up the inclined ramp toward the top of the core. Carrying the body is a collective act, one that brings bodies and more-than-human elements together in a moving ritual. By highlighting collective movement, these two images push against individualizing death narratives. In these images, death is figured as a communal affair.

In addition to foregrounding the collective movement involved in the UDP, these

images also highlight the temporal dimensions of the process at stake inside the UDP structure. Given that the UDP is predicated on human decomposition, it is important that viewers understand the differences between traditional burial/cremation and the composting process that takes place in the core. One of the key differences is the time scale at which these processes occur—whereas decomposition in a traditional burial might take decades (thanks to caskets), and whereas cremation takes just a few hours (thanks to heat), composting takes about a year-and-a-half. Figure 6, for example, presents viewers with an overview of the composting process in both image and words. The image itself is a cross-section of the UDP structure, showing the shape of the core, the ramp that surrounds it, the outlet for the compost, and the surrounding plaza and common areas that are inhabited by visitors in Figure 5. As a cross-section, Figure 6 schematizes what happens in the UDP structure or, in other words, the image invites viewers to study the structure itself, to gain a better understanding of how the UDP works. The words to the right of the image help clarify the temporal process: "Over the span of a few months, with the help of aerobic decomposition and microbial activity, the bodies decompose fully, leaving a rich compost." Together, image and words invite viewers to imagine human bodies (not seen) inside the core moving relatively slowly from the top of the core to the bottom and, eventually, from inside the structure to the outside world and beyond. Yet, this process does not appear linear in the rendering. Rather, the image shows the strangely cyclical structure of the process by enabling viewers to picture how bodies can move through the architectural space—into the facility and up the ramp, into the top and down through the core, out into the plaza and beyond the edges of the image. Indeed, the accompanying text reminds viewers that the UDP is

designed to connect users "with the **cycles of nature**."

The three architectural renderings of the UDP both grapple with the human body's irreducible place within broader ecologies *and* position humans as agentic within those ecosystems. With death and decay as the hinge upon which this decompositional rhetoric turns, the renderings invite viewers to picture themselves inhabiting the UDP site as both visitors to the site and as fodder for the composting process. Thus, the images are constitutive at two levels: on the one level, viewers are positioned as visitors to the site and, as such, are invited to consider what it would be like to live in a world in which the permeability of the human body is embraced rather than rejected. On the other level, however, viewers are invited to see their own bodies as potential participants in the composting process. That is, the architectural renderings do the dual work of bolstering the subject (who must make decisions about how they will inhabit this world) and deconstructing it (since we are, after all, permeable).

Each of these architectural renderings visualizes various aspects of the process at stake in the UDP's proposal. Given that Spade's plan for human composting may strike some as vulgar and unsanitary (e.g., see Lean 2015), even as disgusting, the architectural renderings function rhetorically to aestheticize the process that takes place inside the core, to make it palatable to viewers who may otherwise find the idea of death and decomposition unnerving or even disgusting. The first image viewers confront is also the most complete, the most realistic-looking of the three. Precisely because it is a rendering, Figure 5 offers viewers a chance to imagine what it would be like to inhabit the UDP's completed site. Outside the building, people mill around in the courtyard. Although no explicit signs of decomposition are present in Figure 5, traces of the decomposed body

can be found in at least three places. Near the entrance to the facility, for example, there is a bed of exposed soil. Thus, while the process of decomposition is hidden inside the core (in Spade's [2013, 30] thesis, she calls this the "unseen") its effects spill over into the outside world, literally resurfacing at ground level in the midst of the city. This compost perhaps nourishes the trees that flank the UDP core and the surrounding plaza, enabling new life to flourish even as other life ends. And then there is the person taking some of the compost away in a wheelbarrow, which reminds viewers that the compost made inside the UDP core will be disseminated into nearby community gardens and will provide nutritive soil for flora in other places. This cycle is further highlighted in the text that appears at the top of the image: "Because death is momentous, miraculous, and mysterious / Because the cycles of nature help us grieve and heal / Because our bodies are full of life-giving potential / We propose a new option for laying our loved ones to rest."

In addition to the three architectural renderings, the UDP website is also interspersed with three other images of soil and flowers. Below the initial architectural rendering, for example, viewers are confronted with a large image of soil (Figure 8) with the following text overlaid on it: "The Urban Death Project utilizes the process of composting to safely and gently turn our deceased into soil-building material, creating a meaningful, equitable, and ecological urban alternative to existing options for the disposal of the dead." Whereas the architectural renderings only marginally bring decay and decomposition to the foreground, requiring viewers to imagine the relations between the structure and the process it contains, Figure 8 invites viewers to confront more directly the idea that human bodies can be composted and transformed into "soil-building

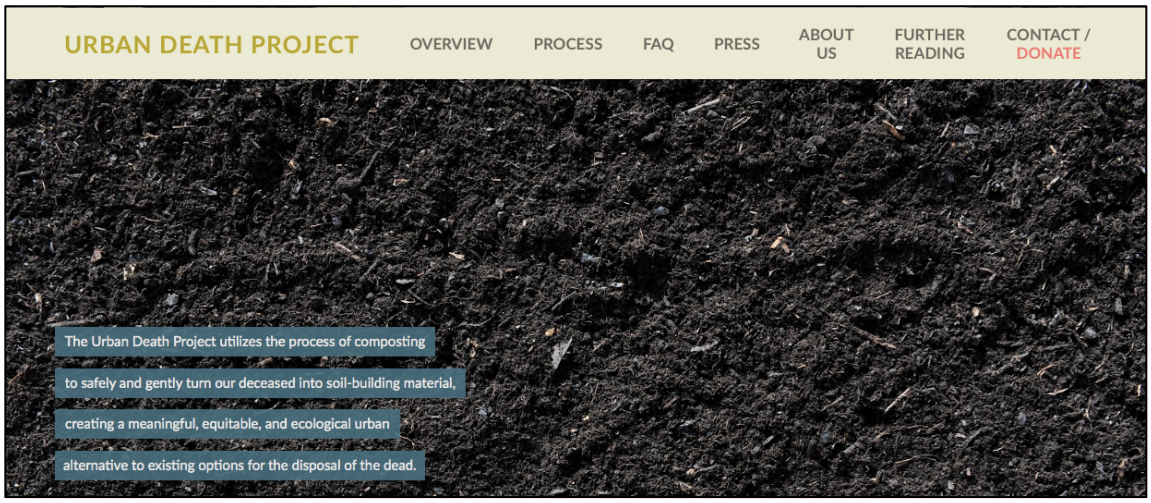

Figure 8 Text overlaying dark soil. Screenshot taken on November 24, 2015, by the author.

material." The earthen material in Figure 8 brings the "unseen" into the realm of the "seen," the contents of the core out into the open for viewers to imagine what a human body can become given the right conditions. The soil presents viewers with one stage in the cycle—the initial product of human composting, the raw materials for new life.

The cycle of birth-death-decomposition-growth is further fleshed out in another image of a field of flowers (Figure 9), which appears below the Overview section of the website (Figure 6). In this image, innumerable wildflowers erupt into a variegated palate of colors—green, orange, yellow, red, purple, and blue fill the frame. A patch of visible soil in the center-left of the photograph connects this image to Figure 8, reminding viewers that soil is at the center of the UDP process. In the background, a metal fence extends from the foreground into the distance, locating this patch of wildflowers in a human environment. Figures 8 and 9 cooperate to evoke a sense of movement and transformation within an ecosystem: the soil produced by decomposing human bodies is rhetorically transformed—in the movement between these images—into a lively field of

Figure 9 Text overlaying field of flowers. Screenshot taken on November 24, 2015, by the author.

flowers. If human bodies have life-giving potential, this potential is realized in the transformation of human corpses into soil-building material, which is a vital substance in supporting life more generally.

Taken together, these images on the UDP website visually and verbally articulate death with ecological systems, creating a decompositional rhetoric that challenges conventional understandings of death, decay, and ecological relations, as well as the cultural practices that have accumulated around death in the United States. As I have suggested throughout this section, these images position death not through more familiar visual codes (tombstones, lawn cemeteries, churches, caskets) but, rather, through a movement betwixt and between the living and the dead (survivors, flowers, soil, architecture). To better understand the rhetorical force of these images, we can consult again Derrida (1993) on the question of the limit. If the boundary between life and death has been figured as a limit of humanism, as he argues, these images participate in the difficult work of decomposing (at least partially) that very limit. But how? As Derrida teaches us, "There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate" (20). The

UDP's images show us just how porous the border between life and death is: In the renderings, those who are living interact with those who are dead, they move with the dead, and, indeed, they move the dead. The UDP is not simply a scene of contemplation or of rest, as is the lawn cemetery, but of action, motion, movement. It is a scene for interacting with that which we usually abject—dirt and corpses. It is a means of confronting in mundane practice the disgusting in us, death itself. In the photographs that are interspersed with the renderings, death and life converge so that it is unclear where one begins and the other ends. The categories of death and life are not limited here to the simply human: where human life cannot be visualized, plant life can; where human bodies wither away, other life emerges. Decomposition is precisely the blurring of life and death or, rather, the transformation of death into life and life into death. In these subtle images, viewers confront the withering away of this boundary.

Dissemination: Human Composting for the Masses

In response to the UDP, dozens of newspapers, magazines, blogs, and television and radio shows have disseminated information about the Project's efforts to develop and bring to fruition a human composting system, effectively extending the Project's reach to hundreds of thousands of people who otherwise may not have heard about it (e.g., Bayles 2015; Berman 2015; Coutts 2013; Einhorn 2015; Eveleth 2014; Fecteau 2015; Frohne 2016; Herzog 2015; Herzog 2016; Holcombe 2016; Holowka 2015; Hooton 2015; Kiley 2015a; Kiley 2015b; Lean 2015; Macz 2016; Markham 2014; Moylan 2013; Nuwer 2014; Palus 2014; Plaugic 2015; Shapiro 2014; Skorheim 2014). As Brandon Kiley (2015a) puts it, "Spade's ideas have rocketed to prominence and begun to change the conversation about what it means to be dead." Writing in *The Atlantic*, Erica Hayasaki

(2013) declared that, "death is having a moment," and then went on to chronicle the experiences of attendees at a Los Angeles, California, "death salon," which brought together academics, artists, professionals, and activists who share a mutual interest in death and dying. The recent publication of Caitlin Doughty's (2015) *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Other Stores from the Crematory*, which quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller, further attests to Hayasaki's claim that people currently seem to be interested in deathcare practices. Perhaps owing to the recent upsurge of interest in death and dying, newspaper and magazine coverage of the UDP has been largely positive and has often implicitly endorsed the principles and aspirations—if not the exact practices—involved in composting dead humans. In this section, I discuss several general tendencies in media coverage of the UDP and show how decomposition is entering the public vocabulary on death and dying.

Among news coverage of the UDP, many journalists position the project as one step in a long tradition of changes to interment practices in the West. Although conventional burials and cremation are prominent in the United States today, this has not always been the case. Rose Eveleth (2014), writing in *The Atlantic*, notes that, "The graveyard as Americans know it is of relatively recent vintage." Similarly, as Cara Bayles (2015) argues in *Slate*, "the history of funeral rites is full of new technologies overcoming old traditions." And in an essay for *The Verge*, Lizzie Plaugic (2015) reports that death practices are by no means ahistorical or unchanging: "What many people today consider to be a pretty standard burial practice—embalming the dead, choosing a casket—didn't really emerge until the Civil War." As these authors note, burial practices may change slowly, but they do change. As new problems (spatial limits, health,

environmental issues) emerge, it should come as no surprise that the technologies of interment are responsive. As such, these authors argue, the UDP should be seen not as an aberration indicative of 21st century vulgarity but rather as an historical advance: "these places where the dead go are going to continue to evolve. The future of graveyards is coming, and here's what it might look like" (Eveleth 2014). What these articles demonstrate is a proclivity to place burial practices within the various historical contexts from whence they derived. Historicizing such practices, I would argue, is one way to make changes to them more acceptable.

One way of historicizing the UDP is to position it as a response to mounting ecological problems. Indeed, many of the articles accept the UDP's own rhetorical self-definition, thus discussing the project in terms of environmental sustainability. Before introducing the UDP, for instance, Palus (2014) argues that, "As people become increasingly concerned with the environment, many of them are starting to seek out ways to minimize the impact their body has once they're done using it." Along the same lines, Plaugic (2015) asks, "If a woman spends a lifetime concerned about her environmental impact, why would she abandon those concerns in death?" Writing for *TreeHugger*, Derek Markham (2014) is similarly hopeful that the UDP might lessen humans' environmental impact: "If the prototype performs as designed, then finding a location for a full-scale version of the facility will follow, perhaps eventually allowing our bodies to do one last good green deed." As these examples suggest, by portraying the UDP as an ecologically responsive and responsible act, it might become more appealing to audiences who find themselves concerned about environmental sustainability. In a world in which figuring out how to reduce one's own ecological footprint can be a difficult task, the UDP

presents an option to do so even after one has died.

While media depictions of the UDP tend to be favorable, with at least one notable exception (Lean 2015), almost all of the articles written about the project note that many people nonetheless feel grossed out by the prospect of being composted after they die. The specter of the abject cannot be so easily abandoned. Journalists variously refer to this feeling as the "ick" or "yuck" factor, and pose it as something that the UDP must overcome before it can attract wide public support. For instance, *The New York Times* reporter Caitlin Einhorn (2015) writes that, "[Spade] and her supporters at the Urban Death Project will have to navigate an array of obstacles. Not least is the yuck factor." The "yuck factor" comes mostly from the fact that, because bodies will comingle during the composting process, there will be no way to identify individuals after decomposition. Like those involved in the suicide bombings cited by Achille Mbembe (2003) and Stuart Murray (2006), those who would be composted in the UDP core would become physically indistinguishable from others. This indistinguishability perhaps heightens fear of decaying corpses because it goes one step further in troubling the ease with which we ascribe subjectivity to a body. When friends and family return to the UDP weeks, months, or years later to retrieve the soil their loved one's body has helped to produce, they will undoubtedly touch and take home the remains of other people as well. This is unavoidable. As Sarah Berman (2015) puts it in *Vice*, "The soil they get back weeks later could technically contain other people." Or, as Bayles (2015) argued, "[The UDP] forgoes the permanent property of an individual grave, the perceived cleanliness of cremation, in the interest of the messy prospect of truly being folded back into the earth." The messiness surely disgusts some.

However, a number of journalists cited here also recognized the very messiness of the UDP as its most radical (even promising) characteristic. Since composting entails the comingling of bodies and other materials, since it always means that a body will become otherwise, Spade's project to compost human bodies has been depicted as a substantial departure from more conventional burial practices that attempt to maintain the integrity of the human body. The UDP is, after all, a mode of disintegrating bodies. Writing in the independent Seattle newspaper, *The Stranger*, Kiley (2015a) makes the point:

> Most importantly, no single body would undergo the process alone. Every body would have company on its way down. This is the Urban Death Project's most radical proposition, the thing that sets it apart from cremation or burial: It deposes the idea of individuation in death. No human body, of course, decomposes on its own.

Thus, Kiley highlights the relational aspect of the UDP, calling attention to the fact that when a body is composted in the core it will necessarily become indistinguishable from other bodies. Whereas traditional burials function to prevent this process of co-composting from happening, the UDP would not function otherwise. As Murray (2006) argues, one way to resist biopower is to deteriorate the liberal subject, to deconstruct the rhetorical boundaries that enable us to imagine subjects as bounded, autonomous *individuals*. Berman (2015) similarly develops this point by citing Spade:

> "I'm kind of forcing the collective issue. You don't get back just your person—you're going to get back a really beautiful material, something you can use to memorialize the person you miss," she said. "We're all part of a collective ecosystem anyway."

Focusing on the collective process of decomposition that takes place in the core, these authors illustrate the ways in which the UDP decenters and deconstructs the liberal subject. Against the ideal of a bounded human being, the UDP offers up collective comingling, collaborative composting.

Despite pointing out that the UDP may be interpreted as icky or yucky, however, many media depictions recuperate the project's legitimacy by highlighting it spiritual or ceremonial aspects. Bayles (2015) ponders whether the UDP's "perceived rejection of existing death rites might also be its biggest stumbling block," for example, but then goes on to show that the UDP develops a ritual of its own that may, in fact, be in keeping with many religious rites. "Even if the Urban Death Project isn't the right model for every religion," she writes, "it does reflect the general direction in which religions might turn for death rituals as they come to terms with the practical problem of lack of space and the moral imperative to care for the planet." Similarly, Jessica Fecteau (2015) points out in *People* magazine that, "[Spade] also thought to create spaces within the building where families can pay respects to their loved ones before the composting begins." And, Palus (2014) characterizes the UDP this way: "It is a green practice, but not simply a utilitarian one." In focusing on the similarities between the UDP and more conventional burial practices, these articles preempt assertions that composting is an act of violence toward the body and participate in its normalization. Although the means may be slightly different, they seem to argue, the ends remain sacred and substantial.

As the preceding pages have demonstrated, much news coverage of the UDP has implicitly accepted the project's principles even if it questions some of its specific practices. In doing so, these media have disseminated the project's vocabulary of death, decomposition, and ecological politics to broad audiences for whom these issues may have otherwise gone unnoticed. Like the UDP's own rhetoric, news coverage introduces some of the potential criticisms of the project, but quickly rebuffs them by arguing for the project's radical, ecologically oriented ends. Moreover, by emphasizing the ritual,

ceremonial aspects of the UDP, news coverage depicts Spade's proposal as being sensitive to the needs of the living, those who remain when a loved one dies. The UDP is certainly a human composter, but it is also a space where people can grieve. By disseminating the concepts driving the UDP in a mostly positive light, news media have become allied forces in the alternative burial movement's efforts to rethink death and dying.

Decomposition on the Horizon

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the Urban Death Project functions to rhetorically decompose several historically salient deathcare practices. In the process, the UDP's rhetoric has exerted additional force—decompositional in its own right—on broader questions about what it means to be human and about our ecological enmeshment. By challenging the given order, which places humans outside of certain natural processes (what Spade calls the "cycles of birth-death-decomposition-rebirth"), the UDP both decomposes a rather anthropocentric notion of the human and recomposes a sense of the human that is more relational. The UDP understands the human not as a stable entity to be preserved but, rather, as a shifting assemblage that will inevitably transform. Acknowledging and embracing the inevitability of human decay, the UDP accepts an ecological understanding of human entanglement and mortal materiality. It is through the process of decomposition that the human body becomes most ecologically collaborative: allowing our bodies to decay alongside one another, fostering this simultaneously destructive and productive process, is a way of channeling the energy contained within our flesh and bones back into the land-community from which we were

composed. In this way, the UDP's rhetorical force is exerted most powerfully on our very concept of what it means to be a human being. This is a highly significant transformation in the history of American deathcare practices that, if realized, could radically alter the way we treat our postmortem bodies.

This view of the body is accomplished through the UDP's rhetoric of bodily decomposition. In a TED Talk that has received nearly 9,000 views on YouTube alone, Spade explains the reasoning behind her turn to human composting while also animating the concept of decomposition as a means of challenging the status quo in the American funeral industry (*Life After Life* 2016). In that talk, Spade likens decomposition to a kind of magic. Describing her initial encounter with the practice of "livestock mortality composting," in which animals are composted and transformed into fertilizer, Spade recalls being astonished at the ways in which organic material could be turned into a richly nutritious and ecologically beneficial material. Against a view of human bodies that confines them narrowly to a select few cultural rituals, Spade wondered if the same process could be applied to humans. By thinking of dead human bodies as storehouses of energy, the UDP unsettles longstanding prohibitions on putting corpses to use. It does this, in part at least, by challenging the ways we think of and relate to human corpses. Rather than abjecting cadavers, literally excluding them from our everyday lives by handing them over to a professional class of funeral workers, the UDP endeavors to bring us back into close contact with the dead human body. By bringing the abject back into our sphere of everyday life, we are more likely to understand corpses not as distant and disgusting but as important parts of the natural cycles that connect the living with the dead. The UDP is wagering that such contact is likely to help us see human bodies as

mortal assemblages teeming with energy. This notion of the human body locates within it quite literally the power to create new life outside of heteronormative and biopolitical logics of reproduction. Decomposing bodies do not so much reproduce human life as they assist in the production of the grounds upon which life can emerge and be sustained. For Spade, this process is a kind of magic.

By playing with the concepts of dirt and decomposition, Spade enacts a sort of rhetorical magic of her own. In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde (1998) considers the trickster—a figure in many myths that crosses boundaries and upsets given orders—in relation to what he calls "dirt-work." For Hyde, dirt-work operates by thrusting order into disarray—the status quo can, he argues, be challenged by the "strategic application of dirt" (176). Here, dirt can be both physical and metaphorical. Rhetorics that transgress the given order can function as forms of dirt-work when they thrust the taken-for-granted into question or, in other words, when they decompose the given order. Since dirt is synonymous with disorder, its "strategic application" serves to put hegemonic formations under pressure and to cast doubt on the sureness or rightness of tradition. Dirt-work does not serve primarily to create confusion, however much it may do so initially. Rather, out of the confusion generated by muddying the boundaries of convention, a new order (perhaps one that accommodates or at least tolerates a higher degree of messiness, as is the case with the UDP) emerges. Dirt-work, then, is about creating new forms of relationality, new assemblages. As Hyde puts it, "Dirt rituals may stabilize things for years on end, but when the order is in fundamental crisis these rituals can become the focal point for change, catalytic moments for dirt's reevaluation and true structural shifts" (188).

As I have suggested here, the UDP's proposal for a human composting system initiates serious shifts in the way we think about the human and its ecological relationality by decomposing the liberal human subject and giving way to a form of bodily assemblage that radically transforms the human into an energy rich material that can circulate through the land-community. As the body enters into the assemblage imagined by the UDP, it is materially decomposed but not annihilated. Rather, from an ecological perspective, the process of decomposition is essentially a reordering of energy. Energy contained within the body is fragmented and disseminated in new networks in which the human is decentered. In both conventional burial and cremation, the body's energy is either kept in reserve or diminished. Yet, with human composting that same energy is made to travel and compose new assemblages: the fragmented human body becomes a source of sustenance for vegetables and plants, which in turn support animal life. Whereas the liberal subject of conventional burial is identified with stability, autonomy, and individuality, the assemblage produced by decomposition is incoherent, out of control, and radically plural. In the composter, human bodies will become indistinguishable from one another. In the resulting soil material, the remains of multiple decaying bodies will comingle. This rich soil material, composed of materials culled from multiple human corpses in conjunction with carbon-rich materials, can then nourish other biotic assemblages. This new assemblage repurposes energy and, in doing so, radically alters not only the form but the concept of the human.

The assemblage produced by the UDP—let us simply call it "human compost" or, more precisely still, just "dirt"—is made possible because it first passes through, and decomposes, several of the taken-for-granted views of the human body that govern more

conventional burial practices. As the UDP forcefully suggests, conventional burial denies our mortal materiality by separating our bodies from the cycles of life, death, and decomposition. Through the process of abjection, human corpses are denied their place within these cycles, and survivors are disconnected from the fact that they, too, are mortal assemblages. By ordering the world to prevent the human body from fully entering into and participating in these cycles, the form of human exceptionalism built into the modern funeral industry keeps humans at a remove from the inevitable. As Hyde (1998, 179–180) writes, "The models we devise to make sense of the world and the shapes we create to make ourselves at home in it are all too often inadequate to the complexity of things, and end up deadened by their own exclusions." That is, the pollution ideas that structure social reality narrowly confine our understanding and, often, our sensuous experience of life and death. The UDP works to open up our collective relation to death and to our mortal materiality by thrusting the given order, fostered by the funeral industry, into disarray. By creating a scene, a practice, and an idea of the human as irreducibly entangled in ecological cycles, the UDP forces a shift in the conceptual order that has for more than 150 years denied the materiality of the human form and forestalled its inevitable decay.

The Urban Death Project is poised to open its first Recomposition Center in 2023. With much of the research and development completed or underway, the Project now faces the challenge of raising the necessary funds to move from its small-scale prototype to a life-sized version of the human composter. In an interview with the *Capitol Hill Times*, Spade said, "It's really dependent on me raising a boatload of money" (Macz 2016). Like many 21st-century startups, Spade has turned to online crowd sourcing as a

means of generating the money needed to officially launch the UDP. Through Kickstarter, an online fundraising apparatus, she has secured more than $90,000 from some 1,200 individual supporters, and Spade has received fellowships enabling her to work full-time on designing, siting, and coordinating the first human composting system. Just as the UDP radically reimagines deathcare practices, so too does it depart from more established funding models. Without the backing of the deathcare industry, the UDP must set out on the more precarious grounds of user-sourced financing. Its future, like the future of the decomposing body, is as yet unclear. Yet, its rhetorical intervention has already provoked significant conversation and imaginative speculation about the shifting grounds upon which humans think and move, live and die.

Works Cited

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Althusser, Louis. 1971. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press.

"Annual Report of Vital Statistics." 2016. Albany, NY: New York State Department of Health. https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/vital_statistics/docs/vital_statistics_annual_report_2014.pdf.

Bayles, Cara. 2015. "From Compost You Came and to Compost You Shall Return." *Slate*, July 15. http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2015/07/urban_death_project_wants_us_to_compost_the_dead_can_religious_groups_get.html.

Berman, Sarah. 2015. "This Nonprofit Wants to Turn Corpses into Compost." *VICE*. March 18. http://www.vice.com/read/this-seattle-non-profit-wants-to-compost-dead-people-263.

Bernstein, Nina. 2016. "Unearthing the Secrets of New York's Mass Graves." *The New York Times*, May 15. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/15/nyregion/new-york-mass-graves-hart-island.html.

Berridge, Kate. 2002. *Vigor Mortis: The End of the Death Taboo*. London: Profile Books.

Burke, Kenneth. 1950. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Charland, Maurice. 1987. "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (2): 133–50.

Coutts, Christopher. 2013. "Baby Boom Will Lead to Shortage of Cemetery Space." *The New York Times*, October 30. http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/10/30/cemeteries-are-running-out-of-room/baby-boom-will-lead-to-shortage-of-cemetery-space.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 1999. "Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32 (4): 334–48.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

———. 1981. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

———. 1993. *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

———. 2002. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." Translated by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2): 369–418.

———. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.

Donoghue, Janet, and Alison Fisher. 2008. "Activism Via Humus: The Composters Decode Decomponomics." *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 2 (2): 229–36.

Doughty, Caitlin. 2015. *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes and Other Stories from the Crematory*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.

Einhorn, Catrin. 2015. "A Project to Turn Corpses Into Compost." *The New York Times*, April 13. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/14/science/a-project-to-turn-corpses-into-compost.html.

Eveleth, Rose. 2014. "The New Urban Cemetery." *The Atlantic*, September 9. http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/09/the-new-urban-cemetery/379802/.

Fecteau, Jessica. 2015. "Urban Death Project Founder Makes Case for Composting Human Bodies." *PEOPLE.com*. June 15. http://www.people.com/article/urban-death-project-human-composting.

Finney, Patricia J. 2012. "Landscape Architecture and the 'Rural' Cemetery Movement." *Focus on Global Resources* 31 (4). http://www.crl.edu/focus/article/8246.

Foucault, Michel. 1994. "The Subject and Power." In *The Essential Foucault*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, 126–44. New York: The New Press.

Frohne, Lauren. 2016. "Respecting the Earth, Even in Death: Seattle Architect Proposes Human Composting | The Seattle Times." *The Seattle Times*, May 8.

http://www.seattletimes.com/life/respecting-the-earth-even-in-death-seattle-architect-proposes-human-composting/.

Garrison, Cassandra. 2014. “Running out of Space to Bury New York City’s Dead.” *Metro*. December 26. http://www.metro.us/local/running-out-of-space-to-bury-new-york-city-s-dead/tmWlhz---95V5GxH4xaiVo/.

Gruber, David R. 2014. “The (digital) Majesty of All under Heaven: Affective Constitutive Rhetoric at the Hong Kong Museum of History’s Multi-Media Exhibition of Terracotta Warriors.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44 (2): 148–67.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harris, Mark. 2007. *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. New York: Scribner.

Hayasaki, Erica. 2013. “Death Is Having a Moment.” *The Atlantic*, October 25. http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/death-is-having-a-moment/280777/.

Hayden, Sara. 2011. “Constituting Savvy Aunties: From Childless Women to Child-Focused Consumers.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 34 (1): 1–19.

Herzog, Katie. 2015. “How Human Composting Will Change Death in the City.” *Grist*. March 9. http://grist.org/living/how-human-composting-will-change-death-in-the-city/.

———. 2016. “Is Human Composting the Future of Death?” *Grist*. March 31. http://grist.org/living/is-human-composting-the-future-of-death/.

Holcombe, Randall. 2016. “WCU Contingent Works on Latest Phase of Urban Death Project.” *Western Carolina University News*. February 4. http://news-prod.wcu.edu/2016/02/wcu-contingent-works-on-latest-phase-of-urban-death-project/.

Holowka, Tabitha. 2015. “Handling the Dead, Old and New.” *The BG News*. September 21. http://www.bgnews.com/opinion/handling-the-dead-old-and-new/article_981f5026-60da-11e5-905e-0b57e681e720.html.

Hooton, Christopher. 2015. “Why Don’t We Just Compost the Dead?” *The Independent*, April 15. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/why-dont-we-just-compost-the-dead-10178790.html.

Hyde, Lewis. 1998. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Kiley, Brendan. 2015a. “The Architect Who Wants to Redesign Being Dead.” *The Stranger*. March 3.

http://www.thestranger.com/features/feature/2015/03/03/21792773/the-architect-who-wants-to-redesign-being-dead.

———. 2015b. "'Our Dead Deserve Better': The Urban Death Project's Fundraiser Starts at a Gallop." *The Stranger*. March 31. http://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2015/03/31/21985054/our-dead-deserve-better-the-urban-death-projects-fundraiser-starts-at-a-gallop.

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Laderman, Gary. 1996. *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

———. 2003. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Laqueur, Thomas W. 2015. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2010. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto.'" *New Literary History* 41 (3): 471–90.

Lean, Geoff. 2015. "Dead Bodies Are Coming back to Life - as Compost." *The Telegraph*, May 30, sec. Journalists. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/geoffrey-lean/11639998/Dead-bodies-are-coming-back-to-life-as-compost.html.

Life After Life. 2016. TEDxOrcasIsland. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRsopS7yTG8.

Macz, Brandon. 2016. "Urban Death Project's Focus on New Life." *Capitol Hill Times*, September 22. http://www.capitolhilltimes.com/Content/News/Homepage-Rotating-Articles/Article/Urban-Death-Project-s-focus-on-new-life/26/538/38.

Markham, Derek. 2014. "Urban Death Project Wants to Compost Your Grandma." *TreeHugger*. September 11. http://www.treehugger.com/culture/urban-death-project-wants-compost-your-grandma.html.

Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.

McGee, Michael Calvin. 1975. "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (3): 235–49.

Mills, Robert Elliot. 2014. “The Pirate and the Sovereign: Negative Identification and the Constitutive Rhetoric of the Nation-State.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17 (1): 105–35.

Mitford, Jessica. 2000. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Vintage.

Moylan, Richard. 2013. “Country Plots and Alternative Spaces.” *The New York Times*, October 30. http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/10/30/cemeteries-are-running-out-of-room/country-plots-and-alternative-spaces.

Murray, Stuart J. 2006. “Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life.” *Polygraph* 18: 191–215.

Nuwer, Rachel. 2014. “This Project Wants to Compost People After They Die.” *Smithsonian*, September 3. http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/project-wants-compost-people-after-they-die-180952598/.

Olson, Philip R. 2014. “Flush and Bone: Funeralizing Alkaline Hydrolysis in the United States.” *Science, Technology & Human Values* 39 (5): 666–93.

Palus, Shannon. 2014. “How to Be Eco-Friendly When You’re Dead.” *The Atlantic*, October 30. http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/how-to-be-eco-friendly-when-youre-dead/382120/.

Plaugic, Lizzie. 2015. “Dying like an American: Spaceflight, Coral Reefs, and Other Wild Ways to Get Buried.” *The Verge*, June 15. http://www.theverge.com/2015/6/15/8681815/burial-methods-death-urban-death-project-eternal-reefs.

Plumwood, Val. 1999. “Being Prey.” In *The New Earth Reader: The Best of Terra Nova*, edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus. 76-91. Boston: MIT Press.

Santora, Marc. 2010. “City Cemeteries Face Gridlock.” *The New York Times*, August 13. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/realestate/15cov.html.

Schutten, Julie Kalil. 2008. “Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter.” *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 2 (2): 193–211.

Shapiro, Nina. 2014. “The Urban Death Project Will Help You Give Back—by Turning You Into Compost.” *Seattle Weekly*. July 8. http://www.seattleweekly.com/news/953590-129/the-urban-death-project-will-help.

Shaun. 2011. “Human Waste Composting.” *Shaun’s Backyard*. December 22. http://shaunsbackyard.com/191/human-waste-composting/.

Skorheim, Jamie. 2014. “Cremation, Burial or Compost? Seattle Woman Proposing New Way to Dispose of Deceased.” *MyNorthwest.com*, November 6. http://mynorthwest.com/76/2638399/Cremation-burial-or-compost-Seattle-woman-proposing-new-way-to-dispose-of-deceased.

Spade, Katrina. 2013. “Of Dirt and Decomposition: Proposing a Resting Place for the Urban Dead.” Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst.

———. 2015a. “Homepage.” *Urban Death Project*. http://www.urbandeathproject.org/.

———. 2015b. “What to Do With Our Bodies After We Die.” *The Huffington Post*. February 23. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katrina-spade/what-to-do-with-our-bodies-after-we-die_b_6737106.html.

Spencer, Leland G., and Joshua Trey Barnett. 2013. “Touring Homophobia: Understanding the Soulforce Equality Ride as a Toxic Tour.” *Southern Communication Journal* 78 (1): 25–41.

———. 2016. “Rhetorics of Incommensurability: Disarticulating Queer Christianity in Mainstream News Coverage of the Soulforce Equality Ride.” *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 1 (2): 141–58.

Stein, Sarah R. 2002. “The ’1984 Macintosh Ad: Cinematic Icons and Constitutive Rhetoric in the Launch of a New Machine.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2): 169–92.

Sullivan, Heather I. 2012. “Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19 (3): 515–31.

Sweet, Derek, and Margret McCue-Enser. 2010. “Constituting ‘the People’ as Rhetorical Interruption: Barack Obama and the Unfinished Hopes of an Imperfect People.” *Communication Studies* 61 (5): 602–22.

Tate, Helen. 2005. “The Ideological Effects of a Failed Constitutive Rhetoric: The Co-Option of the Rhetoric of White Lesbian Feminism.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 28 (1): 1–31.

Vicaro, Michael Paul. 2016. “Deconstitutive Rhetoric: The Destruction of Legal Personhood in the Global War on Terrorism.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102 (4): 333–52.

Zagacki, Kenneth S. 2007. “Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G. W. Bush’s Iraq War Speeches.” *Western Journal of Communication* 71 (4): 272–93.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIGESTION: THE RISKS AND PROMISES OF CONSUMPTION

Dominant concepts of human identity position humans outside and above the food chain, not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity. Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. Human Exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten.

— Val Plumwood (2008, 70), "Tasteless"

The question is no longer one of knowing whether it is 'good' to eat the other or if the other is 'good' to eat, nor of knowing which other. One eats him regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him.

— Jacques Derrida (1991, 114), "Eating Well"

Whenever I mentioned that I intended to write a chapter on the topic of human edibility, I was almost always met with a shared sense of curiosity that took the form of a question: "You mean you're writing about cannibalism?" Although cannibalism—the consumption of human bodies or parts of human bodies by other humans—does not constitute this chapter's *entrée*, it nevertheless makes for an appetizing intellectual *hors d'oeuvres*, so I want to stick with the question for a moment. In a recent philosophical study covering several sorts of cannibalism, Mikel Burley (2016, 17) notes that, "The

eating of human beings is often assumed to be something in which only barbarians could indulge—something terrible, horrific, even evil." Despite this perhaps privileged presumption, Burley contends, cannibalism is not the sole purview of "barbarians," nor even is it restricted to so-called "primitive" peoples. Humans have historically eaten other humans for a variety of reasons, including in the so called West for ostensibly medicinal purposes. In some cases, humans have cannibalized out of necessity. In others, they have done so as a symbolic gesture. Regardless of circumstance or purpose, cannibalism strikes at fundamental concerns about what it means to be human: what (and how) we ingest says much about who and what we are, what kinds of beings we are and want to become.

On multiple levels, ingestion constitutes *Homo sapiens*. It is in this sense that cannibalism has long been conceived of as a particularly telling form of consumption, either disregarded outright as mere myth or quickly condemned as a crime against civilization. Yet, Burley (2016, 3) argues, by taking the consumption of human flesh seriously "we enlarge our appreciation of what it is to be a human being, and hence of what it is to be the kind of beings we are." Attending to the cannibalistic rituals of the Wari' tribe in particular, Burley unravels a form of "mortuary cannibalism" (12) in which community members take part in consuming the bodies of the deceased. Prior to the 1960s, when "external religious and cultural forces" (16) began shifting Wari' traditions, it was thought better to ingest corpses than to bury them in the earth. Indeed, up to that point, it was important that "no part of the corpse be allowed to enter or even touch the earth, for the earth was associated with dirt and pollution—a cold and damp place to which neither the body nor even any of its substances should be abandoned" (Burley

2016, 13). Instead, the bodies of community members were cut into small pieces, cooked over an open fire, skewered on wood splinters, and consumed by friends and family. Even the fat, dripping from the heat of the inferno, was not to touch the earth. Caught by someone, it was either ingested or smeared onto the bodies of those taking part in the feast. The entire body was to be eaten by other humans.

What Burley and most others who broach the topic of human edibility fail to recognize, or choose to ignore, is the extent to which human bodies are always already comestible. Cannibalism is only one of many circumstances in which human corpses find themselves serving as fodder for others. In fact, human edibility is usually a much more banal experience. Within our gut, for instance, microorganisms incessantly make meals out of our bodies, an activity that carries on from cradle to grave. Scientists include this internal, microscopic buffet in the activity of the "microbiome," what Joshua Lederberg describes as the "ecological community of commensal, symbiotic, and pathogenic microorganisms that literally share our body space" (Lederberg and McCray 2001). And the feast continues when we die. Decaying bodies become "necrobiomes." Imagine that a human dies in the woods; no one is around to whisk it away to a morgue or funeral home. "Quickly," writes Ed Yong (2015), "a dedicated coterie of bacteria, fungi, and nematode worms emerges to dine on this artisanal feast." As necrobiotic communities spring up around a decomposing corpse, organisms thwarted neither by putrescence nor by the presence of other messmates make a meal of the rotting flesh. Although some find the prospect of becoming food for others comforting (Haraway 2008), for many people human edibility is likely a more discomforting possibility.

Conventional burial practices have offered consumers a sense of reprieve from the

reality of human edibility, quite literally segregating corpses from the routes by which other organisms might reach them. Metal caskets and concrete vaults serve as seemingly impenetrable barriers that keep human bodies safe from the gnawing tendencies of organisms large and small. The ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (2008, 71) found in these practices strong evidence of both human exceptionalism and dualist thinking:

> The exceptionalist denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our conventional death and burial practices—the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent anything digging us up, supposedly *keeps the western human body from becoming food for other species*. (emphasis mine)

As Plumwood notes, conventional burial materializes a way of thinking that denies human edibility, shielding the human body from the consumptive force of the more-than-human world. Even conservation burial promises to prevent buried human bodies from becoming food for certain kinds of critters. For instance, Ramsey Creek Preserve's website reassures its customers that, "Even relatively shallow natural burials where no casket is used are safe from animal interference" ("Frequently Asked Questions" n.d.). Animal "interference" is a loosely veiled metaphor for consumption. Fear of becoming food for others is rampant within Western cultures (Barnett 2016; Schutten 2008). Just as considering cannibalism helps us, as Burley suggests, expand our senses of what it is like to be human, so too might an engagement with the broader issue of human edibility enlarge and complicate our understandings of the concept of the human and ecological enmeshment more generally.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter I explore one contemporary endeavor to render human bodies edible not for other human beings but, rather, for some of the more-than-human cohabitants upon which we would normally nibble—mushrooms. Launched

in 2011 by Jae Rhim Lee, the Infinity Burial Project (IBP) proposes an audacious intervention for the deathcare industry: death shrouds laced with human-eating mushrooms that not only decompose corpses but also remediate the toxins which have accumulated within our bodies. As Thierry Bardini (2014, 7) writes, "We are toxic as hell. Yes: you, me and pretty much every well-fed occidental consumer, gorged with contaminants and pollutants, heavy metals, cyanide and other lethal poisons slowly accumulated in the course of our lives, when we are not born with them." The IBP's strain of human-eating mushrooms is designed to rapidly reduce the human body to a soil-building material. In the process, the accumulated toxins invoked by Bardini are reportedly filtered from the body, inaugurating a form of postmortem detoxification. By intertwining mycology (the study of fungi) and toxicology (the study of toxins) with ecological deathcare practices, the IBP works to unsettle the taken-for-granted sense of hierarchy regarding consumption that has long imposed itself in human cultures, namely, the idea that human beings are not supposed to be eaten.

The IBP forces human audiences to grapple with the possibility that becoming fodder for others is a means of intervening in a world brimming with toxins. In a filmed TED Talk that has garnered more than 1.3 million views online, Lee (2011), clad in a head-to-toe prototype of her mushroom burial suit, explains that the project is a response to the toxicity of the modern funeral industry. "By trying to preserve our dead bodies," Lee tells audience members, "we deny death, poison the living, and further harm the environment." Wanting to buck tradition, she looked for an alternative to conventional burial and cremation: "I thought maybe I could train an army of toxin-cleaning edible mushrooms to eat my body." The initial idea was simple yet innovative: raised in petri

dishes, the mushrooms eat their companion's loose hair, fingernail clippings, and dead skin. Over time the mushrooms become accustomed to eating the sloughed off elements of their companion and are eventually able to be incorporated into a death suit that will be wrapped around the human body and buried in a shallow grave. Lee explains: "When I die the infinity mushrooms will recognize my body and be able to eat it." While a handful of audience members chuckle in the background, Lee further reports that, "believe it or not, a few people have offered to donate their bodies to the project to be eaten by mushrooms." For Lee, the IBP is not only scientific experimentation or performance art. Rather, rethinking modern burial practices is a means of making visible, and thus taking responsibility for, the fact that humans are, as she says, "intimately connected" to our environments as both eaters and eaten.

Since Lee unveiled her idea publicly in 2011, the IBP has metamorphosed from a big, experimental idea into a small business called Coeio that sells the mushroom burial suits online to anyone with $1,500 (a mushroom casket liner, on the other hand, costs just $700) and a willingness to give themselves over as fodder for the more-than-human world. The name Coeio, as Laura Regensdorf (2016) notes, "riffs on a Latin word meaning 'assemble, or come together.'" What the IBP proposes to create is a world in which coming together, or assembling, around the comestible human body is less science fictional than ordinary, less worrisome than welcomed, by human beings who make end-of-life choices about whether and how their bodies will be consumed by other kinds of beings. Thus, the project takes on the double burden of transforming deathcare practices and, more fundamentally, challenging anthropocentric visions of the human as somehow transcending the food web. When compared to conventional burial, which sequesters the

human body in layers of temporary barriers, and cremation, leaving little of the body to nourish ecosystems, the IBP's vision of deathcare radically upsets the given order by creating the conditions of possibility for alternative assemblages in which the human body is intimately entangled in comestible relations.

Over the course of this chapter, I flesh out some of the rhetorical tactics through which the IBP produces these conditions of possibility. Drawing on and extending my earlier argument that the IBP mobilizes a rhetoric of carnality to generate a politics of edibility (Barnett 2016), I argue here that the IBP *digests* the notion of the human subject and produces, as a byproduct, a robust notion of assemblage that takes seriously human edibility and consumptive reciprocity. In doing so, the IBP deteriorates two longstanding assumptions about the human subject—namely, that the subject is qualitatively different from the ecosystems within which it is enmeshed and is distinguished in part by its capacity to consume other kinds of beings while remaining, for the most part, off the table for others to consume. Before turning to a close reading of the IBP's rhetoric of carnality, I engage in an extended meditation on the relationship among consumption, subjectivity, and theories of assemblage. Tracking arguments made by Derrida, Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway, and Jane Bennett, I consider what it means to "eat" and "be eaten" by others. I then put these ideas to work in my reading of several textual fragments circling around the IBP—from the TED Talk that launched the IBP onto the public screen to the documentary *Suiting Dennis* that introduces audiences to the first adopter, and from Coeio's website to public responses to the possibility of becoming food for others. I bring the chapter to a close by sketching the sort of assemblage made possible by the IBP's rhetoric of carnality—an assemblage that brings human bodies into intimate,

consumptive contact with more-than-human forces through the mediation of the mushroom burial suit, muddling the very boundaries between inside and outside, subject and object, self and other, eater and eaten. This gustatory, digestive assemblage, I suggest, eats away at the human as we have long known it.

Digesting Subjectivity

There is nothing controversial in remarking that humans typically eat plants and animals and that, in doing so, they sustain themselves through the ingestion and digestion of others. Consumption is a fundamental part of what it is to be alive. One cannot live long if one does not consume other organic matter. Consumption is constitutive, quite literally giving material form to the human body upon which all life processes and cultural practices depend. Hence, we eat in order to live. We eat certain kinds of things, however, so that we might live this or that kind of life. Recognizing that what and how one consumes gives shape to the sort of life one might lead, or be presumed to lead, consumptive practices vary both inter- and intraculturally. There is no universal diet, nor even a common "taste" for the same things. Consumptive practices therefore index the stratification of social life; as such, it becomes possible to read the world based on who eats what and how—and why. In this sense, it is possible to notice that consumption is not only constitutive at a biological level, but also at a cultural level. Consumption is precisely one of several activities that makes us (and the other animals and plants we consume) what we are. To put it colloquially, "you are what you eat." More rigorously, "you are a product of what you consume and what consumes you." It is this reciprocal relation of edibility that I turn to throughout this section.

Beginning in somewhat familiar territory, with the relatively homey fare of "subjectivity," it is impossible to not notice that the deconstructor of subjectivity par excellence—Derrida—swerves into a series of gustatory metaphors when asked by Jean Luc Nancy to describe "what comes after the subject." In an interview titled "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," Derrida (1991) sets out a series of claims about the still lingering subject, or its post-deconstructive specter, through a meditation on the question of consumption. While Derrida cannot completely digest the classical discourse on subjectivity, neither can he resist taking yet another bite out of this residual intellectual feast. He refuses the somewhat popular, if not relatively limited, claim that the subject has been "liquidated" (97), referring instead to the ways in which the subject has been "re-interpreted, displaced, decentered, [and] re-inscribed" (98) in philosophical discourses. In other words, philosophers, especially those working in the poststructuralist tradition, are themselves (and "who" are "we"?, Derrida asks) unable to fully digest and excrete this residual notion of subjectivity. Even if we were able to chew up, sometimes violently, the features of the classical Western subject with its "qualities of stance or stability, of permanent presence, of sustained relation to self, everything that links the 'subject' to conscience" (99) … even if we were able to do so, it seems the best we have been capable of thus far is a partial digestion. We suffer from a form of intellectual indigestion.

Like indigestion, the question of the subject bothers a great many thinkers. Derrida's work offers some relief. In texts like *Speech and Phenomenon* and *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida (1973; 1982) displaces the classical Western notion of subjectivity by calling into question the most elemental quality of those theories—presence. Through

a close reading of Edmund Husserl's work, for instance, he disrupts the ease with which something like a "phenomenological voice" (simply put, an internal—*purely* internal—monologue) can be taken for granted. Husserl was working within the Cartesian tradition in which subjects contemplate objects and human beings are understood through their consciousness. Focused as he was on consciousness, Husserl was interested not in whether objects actually exist but, rather, in the fact that they exist for some consciousness. What mattered for Husserl was that one experienced, consciously, a world of objects. One could discern such objects through an investigation of conscious thought in the form of the phenomenological voice.[1] As Derrida (1982) teaches us elsewhere, though, humans are always already composed by their limits. We are not self-enclosed, purely contemplative, self-conscious beings. We become subjects, in the Sausserian sense, through our initiation and ingratiation into *langue*, or the *system* of language that precedes and exceeds every individual human being (Saussure 1998). Derrida goes a step further, though, by suggesting that it is not just in relation to language but in relation to everything outside ourselves that we become what we are. Hence, Husserl's notion of the phenomenological voice, the purely internal soliloquy, is untenable since even an "internal" conversation "with oneself" is dependent at least on the outside force of language. If "Man, since always, is his proper, that is, the end of his proper," then any realistic conception of the human must attend closely to what is outside, or at the "end," of the human (Derrida 1982, 134). "The relation to self," Derrida argues, "can only be

[1] I offer the example of Husserl here not as a representation of phenomenology more generally but merely as one example of how "the subject" has been hemmed in by the too-limited notion of "self-presence." Other phenomenologists, such as Abram (1996), Edward Casey (1996; 2001; 2007), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962; 2004), espouse a more open conception of the subject that is not only open to but constituted by the external world.

différance, that is to say alterity, or trace" (100).

Unlike many poststructural thinkers, Derrida was unwilling to confine this "outside" to language as such. Language—even if we include law and society under this now sprawling term—alone cannot explain completely the constitution of subjectivity, nor certainly of *embodied* subjectivity, even if it goes a long way in that direction. Rather than looking for a "who," then, Derrida suggests that we think in terms of singularities. Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche's (1999) call to discard abstractions, Derrida (1991, 101) notes that, "if we might retain this motif of 'singularity' for a moment, it is neither certain nor a priori necessary that 'singularity' be translated by 'who,' or remain the privilege of the who." Put a bit differently, a singularity is an ontological thing composed by many different, sometimes competing, forces. Humans are certainly singularities, but so are cats, oaks, water bottles, notebooks, and wine glasses—to note just a few of the singularities in reaching distance of the singularity writing these words. By shifting from the issue of "who" to the question of singularities, Derrida asks us to consider what a singularity is—what it is made of, what sorts of forces it exerts, how it can be acted upon, et cetera—rather than searching quixotically for an underlying essence, some "*substratum*" (99) of the subject that we could identify with an "I." Focusing on singularities, in other words, is an immanent rather than transcendent way of thinking, a mode of thought that works with the given without hopes of tracing things back to an origin.

From this focus on singularities, Derrida pivots to an engagement with the broader class of things—human animals, more-than-human animals, plants, objects, substances—to which this title of singularity might be applied. By "ceaselessly analyzing

the whole conceptual machinery" that has sequestered humans from intimacy with other kinds of singularities "and its interestedness, which has allowed us to speak of the 'subject' up to now," Derrida (1991, 109) suggests that we might better be able to make sense of singularities without relapsing into a pre-deconstructive sense of subjectivity. That is, by "ceaselessly" interrogating the systems we have established to distinguish ourselves (as humans) as somehow fundamentally, even essentially, different from and better than what is thought to be outside us, we might come to a more rigorous appreciation of what it is to be human. As Derrida put it, "it is perhaps more 'worthy' of humanity to maintain a certain inhumanity, which is to say the rigor of a certain inhumanity" (110). Rigorously breaking from the lull of human exceptionalism, that is, opens us up to interesting conceptualizations of the human and about its enmeshment in broader ecological assemblages.

As a consequence, Derrida's own thinking was often besieged—a rupture he welcomed again and again—by the question of "the animal." In a well-known essay, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida (2002; see also Derrida 2008) deconstructed the anthropocentric narrative of humanity's dominion over everything thought to be outside the human. In "'Eating Well,'" he forges a different path concerning consumption. When it comes to philosophical discourses on animals, Derrida (1991, 112) notes, "it is a matter of discerning a place left open, in the very structures of these discourses (which are also 'cultures') for a noncriminal putting to death. Such are the executions of ingestion, incorporation, or introjection of the corpse." Cultures are in some significant sense coordinated patterns of consumption: real practices of killing and eating that find their justification in particular philosophico-ethical narratives. Humans

tell themselves certain stories that make sense of killing other kinds of animate creatures and plants over and against whatever forms of sentience we might surmise those others possess. These stories undergird the "sacrificial structure" (112) of cultures, in which some forms of life are given over and given up so that other forms of life might be sustained. In the United States, for example, some nine billion farm animals were slaughtered in 2015 for human consumption ("Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals" 2016). Mass slaughter becomes mass sacrifice once it is framed as a means of providing necessary sustenance for human populations.

And yet, as noted at the outset of this section, few would deny that sustenance in the form of food is necessary. Thus, while Derrida raises doubts about the inevitability of carnivorousness among humans, he does not attempt to do away with the issue of consumption altogether. It cannot be ignored. We cannot, even with the best of intentions, extricate ourselves from relations of edibility. Rather, Derrida (1991, 115) contends that,

> The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since *one must* eat in any case and since it is good and tastes good to eat, and since there's no other definition of the good (*du bien*), *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well* (*bien manger*)? And what does this imply? What is eating?

Since consumption is necessary to live, in other words, some form of sacrifice is also necessary. Life and death intertwine at mealtime. Hence, Derrida, very much attuned to the ties that bind human animals, more-than-human animals, plants, and ecosystems, pushes a different agenda: if we must consume others, how can we consume them well? How to eat ethically? This entails, above all, a certain openness, I would suggest, to the *reciprocity* of eating, which is to say that consumptive gestures move in multiple

directions, across and among species. This reciprocity implies an openness to thinking of humans as food for others. As Derrida notes in the long passage above, our moral consideration cannot rule out, from the beginning in an unqualified way, that "man" should not be eaten. After all, "One never eats entirely on one's own" (115): consumptive relations are never unidirectional.

It is precisely this point—that "one never eats entirely on one's own"—that attracts Donna Haraway to Derrida's musings on consumption. Haraway has long been curious about entanglements among humans and more-than-human critters, technologies, processes, and microorganismic others. In *When Species Meet*, she explores this issue of entanglement through what she calls "becoming-with." Against the language of both Being and being, Haraway advises a more processual, unfolding understanding of what it is to be human. For her, humans *become* human only in relation to a host of more-than-human others, some of which are benign and others of which threaten us. She cites a biological commonplace to substantiate this argument:

> I love the fact that human genomes can only be found in about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space that I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. (Haraway 2008, 3–4)

That is, embodiment entails an inextricable form of relation: my body is never simply my own for the simple yet undeniable reason that my body is composed of many other kinds of beings. Just as there is no way to live and not eat, there is also no way to live and not be in constant contact with a great deal of others that are simultaneously different from me and integral to what I am. We are bound up in several sorts of symbiotic relations from the very beginning and without pause. The "I" is thus always already an "us" or a

"we."

An implication of Haraway's biological and relational view of the human body as always "becoming-with" others is a reciprocal concept of ecological consumption. That 90 percent of "me" that is not quite "human" is incessantly at work consuming my body from the inside, nibbling away in my gut, for instance, as I get on with everyday life largely unaware of this ongoing internal feast. As Haraway (2008, 4) suggests, "I become an adult human being in company with these tiny *messmates*" (emphasis mine). The body is a veritable feast for all sorts of others—gut flora consume me from the inside while mosquitos take their bite from the surface of my skin. Healthy human bodies mostly keep these consumptive practices in check; the immune system works to prevent too much of the body from becoming fodder for others. Illness and death shift these circumstances, though. Whenever an organism, including humans, dies, a community of messmates above and beyond our normal internal community of eaters arrive as if out of thin air to make a meal out of the decomposing body. This necrobiotic assemblage of flies, worms, microorganisms, and other scavengers are uninhibited since the body no longer defends itself against rampant consumption. *The buffet is open!* Haraway embraces the potential of this process: "I love that when 'I' die, all these benign and dangerous symbionts will take over and use whatever is left of 'my' body, if only for a little while, since 'we' are necessary to one another in real time" (4). Recognizing the inevitability of this process of human consumption, Haraway welcomes rather than repudiates the fact that "her" body, too, is comestible.

The reciprocal notion of consumption found in Derrida and Haraway entails not only a modified concept of the human but also a reconsideration of consumptive practices

more generally. Stories of messmates gathering for meals of all sorts are sprinkled throughout *When Species Meet*. For example, readers encounter graduate students eager to take part in a placental feast in the Santa Cruz mountains. One of their colleagues has recently birthed a baby and is serving the placenta, sautéed with onions, to mark the occasion. While Haraway winces at the idea of a *cooked* placenta, she delights in the earthly prospects of this communal affair. A bit later, we encounter a meal of another sort: an end-of-the-year departmental party composed of hungry faculty members, some of whom are appalled by the host's gustatory offering: a whole pig roasting over an open fire during the backyard gathering. The host, whom Haraway paints as an avid hunter with a proclivity for primitive techniques, killed the pig himself. The offended guests raise such a stink that the following year the pig is replaced by sliced deli meats. Again, Haraway sits uneasily with these dueling conceptions of how to eat well, but cannot help but think that the whole pig would go down better than sliced meats of unknown origins. Aware that eating is in some significant sense bound to be impure, Haraway elides too-easy vegan and vegetarian prohibitions against consuming flesh and instead sits with the messy fare among messmates who, after all, consume one another at multiple scales and in many different ways.

To put it slightly differently: organisms are entangled in symbioses of several sorts, all of which entail consumption. Symbiosis entails living alongside other organisms in mutually beneficial—and transformative—relations (Margulis 1998). Haraway (2008, 31) notes that, "Organisms are ecosystems of genomes, consortia, communities, partly digested dinners, [and] mortal boundary formations." This understanding shades her politics of reciprocal consumption. If we must eat, and if we will inevitably be eaten,

there is no chance of becoming pure. Others will always intervene to make our bodies what they are, and our bodies will give form to other beings who prey upon them. This is why Haraway offers no easy answers to questions about what we ought to eat. For her, it is a question of *how* one eats, fully recognizing and appreciating that all eating implies killing. Like Derrida, Haraway advises that "mortal companion species who cannot and must not assimilate one another but who must learn to eat well, or at least well enough that care, respect, and difference can flourish in the open" (287) is the goal, not a feigned purity. Thus, over and against totalizing pronouncements about what ought (not) to be eaten by humans, Haraway's point is that: "There is no way to eat and not to kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence or a final peace" (295). One can, and perhaps should, oppose factory farming, as I do (along with Haraway and Derrida), without therefore condemning all forms of carnivorous consumption. One should also accept human edibility as part of consumptive practices within complex ecosystems where eating is the name of the game, where "living and dying are at stake in practices of eating" (295).

While Haraway hints at the possibility of humans becoming fodder for others, she nevertheless misses an opportunity to think about the full range of cultural transformations an embrace of our own edibility could entail. In "Being Prey" and "Tasteless," Val Plumwood (1999a; 2008) offers an extraordinary account of what it felt like for her to recognize, in a moment of visceral excitement, that being human does not mean transcending the food web. While kayaking in her native Australia, Plumwood was caught in a downpour and taken hold of by an adult saltwater crocodile. Repeatedly jerked under water by the much larger, much stronger saurian creature with an ancient

appetite for flesh, Plumwood was subjected to several "death rolls," the crocodilian version of a knock-out. Remarkably, she survived the near-death experience and, some years later, drew on her recollection of the event to critique forms of human exceptionalism that separate humans from the consumptive circuits at work in ecosystems. "Since then," Plumwood (2008, 69) writes, "it has seemed to me that our worldview denies the most basic feature of animal existence on planet earth—that we are food and that through death we nourish others." Despite the ongoing feast made of our bodies by microorganisms, it is easy to forget that human bodies are inherently and inevitably comestible. Culturally, most of us have avoided this fate. Human edibility is prohibited at all costs: "Predation on humans," notes Plumwood, "is monstrous, exceptionalised and subject to extreme retaliation" (70). Hence, it is a common response to kill more-than-human animals that attempt to or succeed in making a meal out of human bodies.

Given Plumwood's recognition of the basic, fundamental fact that humans, like other animals, are edible, she suggests that we embrace our edibility within a larger ecological ethic. If we are in some significant sense bound to be eaten anyway, why not challenge the anthropocentric and exceptionalist traditions that deny this corporeal fate? Plumwood (2008, 70) contends that, "Dominant concepts of human identity position humans outside and above the food chain, not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity." To counteract these "dominant concepts," Plumwood turns to certain indigenous traditions as inspiration for potentially alternative relations, noting that "the indigenous imaginary sees death as part of life, partly through narrative, and partly because death is a return to the (highly narrativised) land that nurtures life" (70).

Although Plumwood here surely paints "the indigenous imaginary" with too broad a stroke, what is important for my purposes is that she seeks out rituals that work to robustly incorporate the human body into the food web. Doing so entails reconceptualizing the human body, not as the possession of an individual but, rather, as "borrowed from the earth community" (71), as contingent aspects of embodiment. If our bodies are not our exclusive property, as Plumwood and Haraway both contend, it makes some sense that we would be willing, from an ecological perspective, to return them to the broader biotic communities to which they belong.

Plumwood positions deathcare practices as one particularly productive point of intervention. She notes that, "The exceptionalist denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our conventional death and burial practices" (Plumwood 2008, 71). In contrast with the exceptionalist process of sequestering human bodies from others who might consume them, Plumwood suggests that we adopt practices that actually foster these relations of edibility. Inspired by a visit to a "bush cemetery," she wonders what would happen if we got rid of the heavy coffins and concrete vaults to which so many of us in the global west have become accustomed. Rather than seeing this disavowal of conventional burial as an acknowledgement of some genuine finality (wherein death is tantamount to an absolute end), Plumwood turns to animist thinking to suggest that the dead human body is an important opening: "of course *the body* does not just 'end'—it decays or decomposes, its matter losing its prior organizational form and taking on or being incorporated into new forms in a sharing of substance/life force" (74). Put differently, from an animist perspective, even the dead human body is full of life. Choosing to keep that life force from circulating back into

broader ecosystems is a way of refusing the body's mortal materiality. What we desperately need, according to Plumwood, are "mortuary symbolisms and grave practices" that "aim to nourish rather than exclude other life forms" (74).

Such practices will come only after we have adopted an ecological conception of the human—one that is attentive to the ways in which human bodies are part of, not apart from, ecological assemblages that include relations of edibility. In *Vibrant Matter*, the political theorist Jane Bennett considers the issue of "edible matter," including human bodies within this category, from a new materialist perspective. Drawing on insights from Henry David Thoreau and Nietzsche, Bennett (2010, 49) understands "eating as the formation of an assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity." Food produces effects that exceed the merely physical. For some eaters (this one included), for instance, potato chips may exert a force that makes it difficult to stop consuming. The greasy slivers of fried potato exert a force on my hands, which deliver the carbohydrates to my mouth and into my digestive system. I can feel good and bad about these encounters, fulfilled but also let down by the gustatory routes I have travelled to satiate a form of hunger that is not, strictly speaking, pressing. Bennett's point is that practices of eating are both nourishing and more than nourishing; eating also produces public affects: foodstuffs modify the assemblages into which they are introduced. They change the eater's mood and disposition. They draw us in or repel us. They form our bodies in certain ways and not others.

Another way of putting Bennett's argument would be to say that eating is a process of circulating *vital material*. She develops the concept of "thing-power" in order to draw attention to the ways in which matter—even the things we think of as being dead,

inert, and passive—affects change in the world through entering into and transforming assemblages. To say that something exerts "thing-power" is an acknowledgment that "things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their powers" (Bennett 2010, 3). Perhaps this is nowhere more clear than in relations of edibility where one thing literally consumes the other, thereby strengthening itself while weakening what is consumed. Food here, in whatever form, literally energizes the consumer. The consumer extracts from food a necessary life force in the form of energy. While Bennett sticks close to instances where nonhuman edible matter is ingested by humans, she is also taken by the notion that "a profound reciprocity between eater and eaten" (43) ultimately governs relations of edibility. This reciprocity entails that just as carrots and pig flesh powerfully impact upon and shape the human bodies who consume them, so too does human flesh serve as vital matter for other species. Bennett invites us to recognize our own ontological status in relation to those who would make a meal out of our bodies. By seeing our bodies as vital matter we are able to enter into a more ecological relation with what the more-than-human world of organisms and objects, animate and inanimate alike. Indeed, eating is a "series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry" (49). One of the ethical and political challenges, then, is imagining ways of allowing the human body to become more robustly entangled in these ecological processes of consumption.

Deathcare presents an important scene of intervention since, as Plumwood argues, it has turned into a site where human bodies are prevented from becoming fodder for others. The embalming-coffin-vault assemblage of conventional burial literally barricades the human body from hungry others. A product of human exceptionalism and its

attendant pollution ideas, conventional Western deathcare operates with a largely non-ecological conception of the human body and its place within broader land communities. Bennett (2010, 49) notes that, "If the eaten [and I would add eater] is to become food, it must be digestible to the outside it enters." That is, edible matter is not simply available to be eaten. It must be given over, offered up, presented to others who might make a meal of it. It must be served up as edible matter, made accessible to the kinds of beings who might consume it. Plumwood contends that this is an ethical issue: how humans do or do not give their bodies as edible matter shapes our ecological relations and, in a sense, the stability of ecosystems. I turn in the following sections to a close reading of the Infinity Burial Project's "rhetoric of carnality," which, I argue, inaugurates a "politics of edibility" through which human bodies are installed into the food web not only as eaters but also as food for others. I end by considering what sort of edible assemblage these politics make possible.

Making Humans Edible: The Infinity Burial Project

With this conceptual background in mind, it is now possible to make sense of the Infinity Burial Project's efforts to upend Western burial and cremation practices by reconceptualizing dead human bodies as edible parts of the food web. It is one thing to assert that human beings are comestible, to say that humans ought to see themselves as part of—not apart from—the food web. It is quite another to reassemble the concept of the human such that the notion of human edibility can be taken up willingly in practices that exceed the microorganismic feasts always already taking place inside our guts. In the following pages, I examine the IBP's rhetorical efforts to reassemble the human through

three thematic lenses: exposure, edibility, and ecological response-ability. First, I show how the IBP conceptualizes the body as fundamentally and inextricably *exposed* to others. Human bodies are made in encounter with others, human and more-than-human alike, which means that they open onto the world rather than close in upon an underlying subject. Second, I demonstrate how this sense of exposure contributes to a view of the human body as *edible*, that is, capable of both eating and being eaten. Human bodies, as noted earlier, are irreducibly part of, not apart from, the food web. The IBP invites audiences to embrace their role within relations of consumptive reciprocity. Finally, I suggest that this sense of the human body as edible gives way to an *ecological* framework in which humans are intimately entangled with the more-than-human world and in which the question shifts from whether one will be eaten to how and under what circumstances one's body will be consumed by others. The IBP invites us to engage in acts of ecological response-ability, to choose other ways of dealing with our dead bodies. This ecological project extends outward from an acceptance of death to an embrace of one's mortal materiality.

Exposed Bodies

One thing that each of the four theorists cited above—Derrida, Haraway, Plumwood, and Bennett—tacitly agrees upon is that in the course of their lives and deaths human bodies are fundamentally exposed to what is not-human, and that it is precisely through such ceaseless exposure to others that we become most fully what we are. Indeed, for these thinkers, embodiment implies exposure: one lives and dies to the extent to which one's body is exposed to others. In *Precarious Life*, *Frames of War*, and

elsewhere, Judith Butler (2004; 2009; 2016) articulates exposure to embodiment by way of "precariousness." As Butler (2009, 14) argues:

> Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous.

Exposure, then, assumes several meanings at once. First, exposure can mean simply that one is unavoidably in contact with others, human and more-than-human alike, that one leads a necessarily social life. That "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other," as Butler writes, suggests that sociality is itself inescapable. One cannot be totally extricated from social relations, no matter how hard one tries. Second, exposure can mean that one is co-dependent within these relations, that the relations are not optional in either the weak or strong senses of that term. It is this "dependency" that ties us to others and which makes it impossible to survive outside of various forms of relationality. And, third, exposure can mean as well that one is subject to the dependency of others, to the needs of others without whom one's own existence would be unthinkable. Just as we depend on others, so too do others depend upon us.

This tripartite concept of exposure, I argue, implicitly underwrites the IBP's efforts to transform dead human bodies into edible matter. Rhetorically, the IBP situates human bodies as nodal points in networks of flows and exchanges of various kinds of materials. According to the Coeio website, Lee first wore the mushroom burial suit in public during a 2008 fashion show, "Seamless: Computational Couture," at the Museum of Science in Boston. Intrigued by the suit and Lee's conceptual work, followers joined Lee's journey as members of the Decompiculture Society. "The Society joined JR on her

exploration," the website reports, "which included tours of embalming fluid factories, organizing workshops and lectures, even one ejection from the National Funeral Directors Association Annual Convention" ("The Story of a Green Burial Company" 2016). This following helped push the IBP beyond its meager beginnings and laid the foundation for Lee's participation in the TED Global conference in 2011, where she presented "My Mushroom Burial Suit" to an audience of entrepreneurs, scientists, activists, and concerned citizens. As we will see later, this initial TED Talk propelled the IBP's mushroom burial suit, and ecological deathcare, into popular culture.

At the beginning of her TED Talk, Lee (2011) frames the human body in terms of its exposure to and accumulation of toxic chemicals. Toxins are, in fact, the *raison d'etre* for Lee's efforts, operative at the most basic level of her endeavor to robustly incorporate human bodies into the food web. Standing on stage before hundreds of live audience members in her head-to-toe mushroom death suit, she says,

> So I'm here to explain why I'm wearing these ninja pajamas. And to do that, I'd like to talk first about environmental toxins in our bodies. So some of you may know about the chemical Bisphenol A, BPA. It's a material hardener and synthetic estrogen that's found in the lining of canned foods and some plastics. So BPA mimics the body's own hormones and causes neurological and reproductive problems. And it's everywhere. A recent study found BPA in 93 percent of people six and older. But it's just one chemical. The Center for Disease Control in the U.S. says we have 219 toxic pollutants in our bodies, and this includes preservatives, pesticides, and heavy metals like lead and mercury.

In this opening set of statements, Lee links the human body to broader flows of matter through the example of "environmental toxins." The term "environmental toxins" is something of a misnomer, she suggests, since it could easily lead one to believe that this class of toxic chemicals resides out there in some abstract space that we might be tempted to call "the" environment, a space that is both outside of and surrounding the human.

Toxins are not only floating around in the environment, but they are also "everywhere" and even "in our bodies." Thus, Lee mobilizes toxins like Bisphenol A as a way of demonstrating the porousness of the human body: toxic pollutants transgress bodily boundaries, moving from the outside to the inside, thus bringing exposure to the foreground. Here, exposure is framed as potentially dangerous. Toxins, which by definition can cause human health problems, are lurking inside our bodies, threatening us from the inside. Hence, Lee frames the human body as a strange scene of encounters that easily pass out of normal perception. Crisscrossed by forms of exposure, she suggests, the human body is not always what it appears to be.

Foregrounding toxic chemicals in this way, Lee's (2011) TED Talk draws on and exploits widespread cultural aversions to things labeled toxic. The word "toxic" suggests that something is dangerous, risky, even lethal. As Mary Douglas (1966) suggests in *Purity and Danger*, cultures are made through processes of separating the clean from the unclean, the pure from the impure. Though unequally distributed, toxic chemicals are generally understood as unclean, impure, and dangerous and, thus, most of us try to avoid them. There are indeed social movements—the antitoxics and environmental justice campaigns come to mind (see Bullard 1993; Carson 1962; Gibbs and Levine 1982; Gottlieb 1994)—that struggle to thwart the dissemination of some toxic chemicals. Thus, treating toxics as a point of departure in her TED Talk, Lee rhetorically articulates her work to an already acknowledged exigence: toxic chemicals demand attention and action. Moreover, highlighting Bisphenol A, a chemical that has been widely covered in the news media because of its presence in everyday products like water bottles, tin cans, and even "baby teethers," heightens this sense that one is dealing in this talk with something

significant. Since it can cause, as Lee reminds audience members, "neurological and reproductive problems," BPA and other chemicals like it warrant our sustained attention. "Toxics," Pezzullo (2014) writes, "persist as both extraordinary signifiers of precarity and ordinary elements in our everyday lives." Here, exposure to toxics is figured as something to be concerned about, something to worry over, something extraordinary that nevertheless impinges upon us all.

Since human bodies are exposed to toxic chemicals, Lee contends, they are also themselves potentially toxic. Since, in other words, we have up to "219 toxic pollutants in our bodies," according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, then our bodies are not in and of themselves pure but are, rather, contaminated from the very beginning (the term "pre-polluted" is an apt reminder that even human fetuses inherit some of the toxins inside their host's body). And since human bodies accumulate toxins, they become partially indistinguishable from the nefarious chemicals that reside within them. We, too, become toxic. Having laid out in her opening statement the ways in which human bodies are always already contaminated, Lee continues:

> To me, this says three things. First, don't become a cannibal. Second, we are both responsible for and the victims of our own pollution. And third, our bodies are filters and storehouses for environmental toxins. So what happens to all these toxins when we die? The short answer is: They return to the environment in one way or another, continuing the cycle of toxicity. But our current funeral practices make the situation much worse. If you're cremated, all those toxins I mentioned are released into the atmosphere. And this includes 5,000 pounds of mercury from our dental fillings alone every year.

At least two senses of exposure are embedded in Lee's comments. First, she frames the human body as itself something to which other kinds of beings, human and otherwise, are exposed. Troubling an anthropocentric notion of exposure, which focuses only on the

ways in which human bodies are themselves impinged upon, sometimes forcefully, by more-than-human others, Lee implies here that the human body itself can be an unwitting source of danger for others. Hence, she half-jokingly implores that audience members not "become a cannibal." Eschewing the more stereotypical injunctions against cannibalism with which I began this chapter, Lee finds reason to worry about human consumption because of the toxic pollutants we harbor within our flesh. Framing human bodies as "filters and storehouses of environmental toxins" is a way of unsettling the presumed beneficence of the human body. While other discourses (e.g., on HIV/AIDS and some other diseases) frame the body as potentially dangerous (Sontag 1989), Lee brings this logic of impurity to bear on ordinary, "healthy" bodies by drawing attention to the ways in which toxins might render our bodies the nefarious partners in certain relations. Like fish that live in ponds polluted with mercury, she suggests, we should be wary of consuming human flesh brought up in postindustrial environments.

There is also a second, more expansive sense of exposure at work in Lee's framing of the human body that extends from the idea that toxic accumulation might make our bodies dangerous for others. When Lee says that, "our current funeral practices make the situation much worse," she points to the ways in which our cultural practices themselves can be toxic to other cohabitants of ecosystems. Citing cremation specifically, Lee highlights the fact that heavy metals inside our bodies like mercury can be dispersed into the air as a byproduct of incineration. "If you're cremated," she explains, "all those toxins I mentioned are released into the atmosphere." Enthymematically drawing on longstanding cultural understandings of the dangers of mercury (cf. Chen 2012), Lee invites audiences to come to their own conclusions about the dangers of emitting mercury

into the atmosphere. If it is unhealthy for individual bodies, the hidden logic goes, it must also be bad when disseminated. Moreover, by highlighting "our current funeral practices" more generally, Lee proposes a much more wide-ranging critique of human activity. Not only does cremation damage ecosystems by releasing emissions of various kinds, but conventional burial also harms environments through its resource-intensive use of hardwoods, metals, and reinforced concrete, as well as the immense amounts of toxic embalming fluids (approximately 827,000 gallons) it pumps into corpses annually to preserve them for funerals and viewing services (Harker 2012). As Lee notes, these bodies are "pumped with toxic formaldehyde to slow decomposition—a practice which causes respiratory problems and cancer in funeral personnel. So by trying to preserve our dead bodies, we deny death, poison the living, and further harm the environment." Thus, Lee not only frames particular human bodies as potentially toxic but also contends that human cultural activity more generally threatens ecosystems. In this way, Lee aligns herself with ecological critics who condemn human practices that do harm to the more-than-human world by overlooking or ignoring the ways in which seemingly benign activities such as burial and cremation pose threats to other forms of life.

Thus far, I have suggested that Lee frames the human body as exposed to environmental toxins while simultaneously framing the more-than-human world as exposed to human cultural activities. Exposure runs in multiple directions. Indeed, Lee implies that exposure is a necessary condition of life itself; it can be neither avoided nor abandoned. At the end of her TED Talk, Lee subtly points to this underlying sense of exposure when she says that,

> Accepting death means accepting that we are physical beings who are intimately connected to the environment, as the research on environmental

> toxins confirms. And the saying goes, we came from dust and will return to dust. And once we understand that we're connected to the environment, we see that the survival of our species depends on the survival of the planet. I believe this is the beginning of true environmental responsibility.

Here, "accepting death" implies repudiating conventional burial and cremation since both of those practices, as Lee earlier put it, "deny death, poison the living, and further harm the environment." Abandoning these practices also entails grappling with the physicality of the human form, the fact that human bodies are "intimately connected to the environment." In other words, taking death seriously means coming to terms with our mortal materiality, the ontological fact of our material entanglement with others, human and more-than-human alike, as a precondition for living and dying. This sense of exposure is further fleshed out when Lee notes that, "the survival of the species depends on the survival of the planet." The species—*Homo sapiens*—cannot be separated from the planet—Earth—since the two are always already exposed to one another. Yet, Lee's logic runs only in one direction: it is the species, not the planet, that ultimately depends upon the other for continued survival. Earth does not need human beings, but human beings can only carry on with the infrastructural supports of their home, their ecosystem (Butler 2004; 2016). Thus, Lee ends her TED Talk by opening onto an ethical question about the forms that such exposure might take in the future: "true environmental responsibility," she contends, can come only after human beings have accepted their physicality, which brings them into inextricable connection with that which is more-than-human, and created cultural practices that honor rather than obfuscate that fundamental connection.

Edible Bodies

Another name for this fundamental connection with the more-than-human world is "edibility." In the journal *Environmental Communication*, I have argued that the IBP rhetorically generates a "politics of edibility," or ecological relationships that engender consumptive reciprocity, by framing human bodies through a language of carnality (Barnett 2016). And as noted in an earlier section, edibility is a banal quality of carnal co-existence: human bodies are consumed constantly by microorganisms inside of them and on their surfaces, and human bodies must consume others in order to survive. Plumwood and Haraway, in particular, teach us that eating and being eaten are insuperable aspects of what it means to be human. For these thinkers, the (dead) human body is no different than any other organic material in so far as it is bound to decompose and be consumed by others. Thus, the question is not *whether* one will be eaten, but *how*, by *whom*, and *under what circumstances*. To play with Derrida's (1991) question—How are we to eat well?—we might also ask, How are we to be eaten well? The IBP confronts this question frontally by challenging the ways in which modern funeral practices deny human edibility by sequestering the body from the more-than-human world. Whereas cremation largely destroys the nutritive elements of the human body through incineration, conventional burial creates physical barriers between the body and the outside world, effectively delaying decomposition. The mushroom burial suit offers an alternative, one that avows rather than avoids human edibility. In this section, I demonstrate how the IBP rhetorically carves out a space for considering and creating relations of reciprocal consumption.

The IBP positions consumption as a partial solution to the ecological challenges

imposed by both cremation and conventional burial. In her TED Talk, Lee (2011) invites audiences to consider the possibility that mushrooms, known for their potential for bio-remediation, might be capable of filtering the very toxins to which we are exposed and, through our cultural practices, to which we expose the more-than-human world. After outlining the ecological problems with the modern funeral industry, she introduces the project in this way:

> I'm an artist, so I'd like to offer a modest proposal at the intersection of art, science, and culture: the Infinity Burial Project, an alternative burial system that uses mushrooms to decompose and clean toxins in bodies. The Infinity Burial Project began a few years ago with a fantasy to create the Infinity Mushroom—a new hybrid mushroom that would decompose bodies, clean the toxins, and deliver nutrients to plant roots, leaving clean compost. But I learned it's nearly impossible to create a new hybrid mushroom. I also learned that some of our tastiest mushrooms can clean environmental toxins in soil. So I thought maybe I could train an army of toxin-cleaning edible mushrooms to eat my body.

These statements outline the possible ecological benefits of conceiving of human bodies as edible matter and creating practices that harness that consumptive potential. Here, mushrooms—usually understood as food *for* humans—are framed as consumers of humans. This reversal is accomplished first in a somewhat indirect way, as when Lee notes that her "fantasy" of creating a new strain of mushrooms was thwarted by the mushrooms themselves, which resisted her attempts to manufacture a novel form of fungi. Lee's attempt at mastery, in other words, was stifled by the more-than-human mycelia, which cannot simply be controlled for human ends. Having given up on this fantasy, Lee learned that certain strains of already existing mushrooms could "decompose bodies, clean the toxins, and deliver nutrients to plant roots." The verbs *decompose*, *clean*, and *deliver* do not immediately suggest consumption but, rather, forms of transformation. Lee's invocation of these verbs makes clear that the mushrooms will

perform actions on the body, but these actions initially seem more or less benign. The mushrooms are first pitched, then, in terms of their active relation to the toxins that accumulate within human bodies. While they cannot be entirely controlled, their decompositional tendencies can be channeled in productive directions.

This reversal of the taken-for-granted relationship between eaters and eaten—a relationship that would typically position humans exclusively as eaters of mushrooms, which do not likewise consume humans—is further accomplished through a more direct invocation of the idea of consumption. Lee notes that she attempted to "*train* an army of toxin-cleaning edible mushrooms to *eat* [her] body" (emphasis mine). In this partly metaphorical, partly factual statement, Lee positions herself as the commander-in-chief of a cadre of mycelia, as one who prepares fungi to decompose and consume her body. The IBP's deconstructive logic is encapsulated within this statement. By training mushrooms to "eat [her] body," Lee anticipates her own decomposition—not only her own death but also the consumption of her body by others. Moreover, she trains the very organisms that will carry out this act of bodily ingestion and digestion. Through the process of training her "toxin-cleaning edible mushrooms," then, Lee simultaneously exerts force on her mushroom companions but also, and more profoundly, acknowledges and harnesses the force of the mycelia that will eventually surpass whatever force of control she has over them. More simply, at the precise moment Lee seems to be managing the mushrooms by training them she also loses control since they will eat her body. The consumer becomes the consumed, the eater the eaten, not in a spectacular scene of one force overcoming another but through a subtle displacement of the power to consume.

Another way of putting this point would be to say that the IBP invites users not

only to relinquish dreams of mastery by seeing themselves as full participants in the food web but also to make their bodies available as fodder for others. It is in this sense that the IBP carries out what Plumwood (2008) advises in "Tasteless," namely creating funeral practices that honor human edibility and that materialize possibilities for humans to be consumed by more-than-human others. In her TED Talk, Lee (2011) describes the initial process of giving her body over as fodder:

> So today, I'm collecting what I shed or slough off—my hair, skin, and nails—and I'm feeding these to edible mushrooms. As the mushrooms grow, I pick the best feeders to become Infinity Mushrooms. It's a kind of imprinting and selective breeding process for the afterlife. So when I die, the Infinity Mushrooms will recognize my body and be able to eat it.

Figured as a collection of edible fragments—"hair, skin, and nails"—the human body becomes a source of sustenance for the mushrooms, a coterie of consumable parts that nourish other life. Since bits of Lee's body "shed or slough off," they disperse as they detach from the body. Hence, the human body is always already in a process of becoming undone, always giving way to forces beyond its control, always physically coming apart. Lee harvests these fragments and feeds them to other organisms, thus cultivating a taste for the human among her mushroom companions. This leads, she contends, to an act of recognition where her mycelium messmates are "able to eat" her body because they have already been trained to do so. Already given over as fare for others in life, that is, Lee speculates that her body will be particularly probable food when she dies. This effect of recognition, however, is premised on prior acts of training: the mushrooms are able to consume her body because she has already shown them how and that it is acceptable to do so, because she has "trained" them to treat her body as fodder.

As Lee describes this process of training the mushrooms to eat her body, an image

appears on the large screen behind her. In the photograph are three petri dishes, small plastic containers normally used to grow cultures in laboratories, that each contain little piles of the hair, skin, and fingernail clippings that Lee had been collecting. Arrayed like tapas, these gatherings of organic material visually reinforce the point that Lee verbally articulates, namely, that the body—whether living or dead—can be served up as food for others. That is, the image visualizes the fact that human bodies are always already comestible, even when they are living, because the body itself is not whole but instead is composed of fragments that come and go. Though the goal of the mushroom burial suit is to turn *corpses* into fodder, we see in this photograph the potential to imagine our bodies as food for others right here, right now: *You are already food!* Simultaneously sterile (since in petri dishes) and homey (since we know these little bits of DNA once belonged to the shrouded woman we see on stage), this image forcefully demonstrates as well how human bodies are always already fragmenting, coming undone, disseminating, and dispersing. These bits of Lee's body would normally accumulate in the crevices of our couch cushions and on our bathroom floors, but here they are gathered purposefully as a meal. This visualization of the fragmenting, edible body serves to make real the claims that Lee advances. Human edibility becomes not simply an idea but a practice, not just science fiction but science itself.

In addition to describing and visualizing her efforts to train mushrooms to eat her body, Lee and colleagues also developed an iPad application to help audiences themselves visualize the process of becoming-food for others. Designed for the Zero1 Biennial, an exhibition hosted in both California's Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay area that featured works by local, national, and international artists whose projects

were situated at the "nexus of art and technology" ("About: Zero1 Biennial" 2012), the application, called "Decomp Me," allowed participants to take pictures of themselves and then drag-and-drop mushroom spores onto their portraits (Figure 10). In an exhibition space, Lee affixed an iPad to a suspended arm that hung over an operating table like a dentist's lamp. Participants laid under the device, took pictures of themselves with the iPad, and then dragged digital mycelia onto their portraits. The application then created and displayed a time-lapse image sequence of the body being digitally decomposed (Figure 11). As the simulated timeline progressed the human body gave way to the mushrooms, which "ate" away at their flesh and eventually transformed the recognizable human form into a scene of multispecies decomposition and edibility. These images offer viewers a glimpse of what *their* bodies might look like should they choose to embrace their own edibility and don the mushroom burial suit when they die.

Following Christine Harold (1999, 166), we might say that the IBP's images of human decomposition and consumption operate by "making the body and our conceptions of it strange." In the images, bodies mingle with one another in a confusing mix of sprawling spores, budding mushrooms, and the persistent though impermanent remnants of a human body. In Figure 12, for instance, a barely visible set of teeth in the bottom center of the image recalls an X-ray's visualization of the body's bones, reminding viewers that they are seeing a human body being worn away. The mushroom spores spread, web-like, across this background we recognize as a human face, taking over and covering it in a thick, sinewy maze. A cluster of mushrooms reaches out at the viewer from where we imagine a set of eyes once was. As Julie Schutten (2008) argues, we not only need philosophical understandings of the interconnectedness of humans and

Figure 10 Dragging-and-dropping mushroom spores. Image from the "Decomp Me" app produced by the Infinity Burial Project. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 11 Mushrooms consuming a human face. Image from the "Decomp Me" app produced by the Infinity Burial Project. Reprinted with permission.

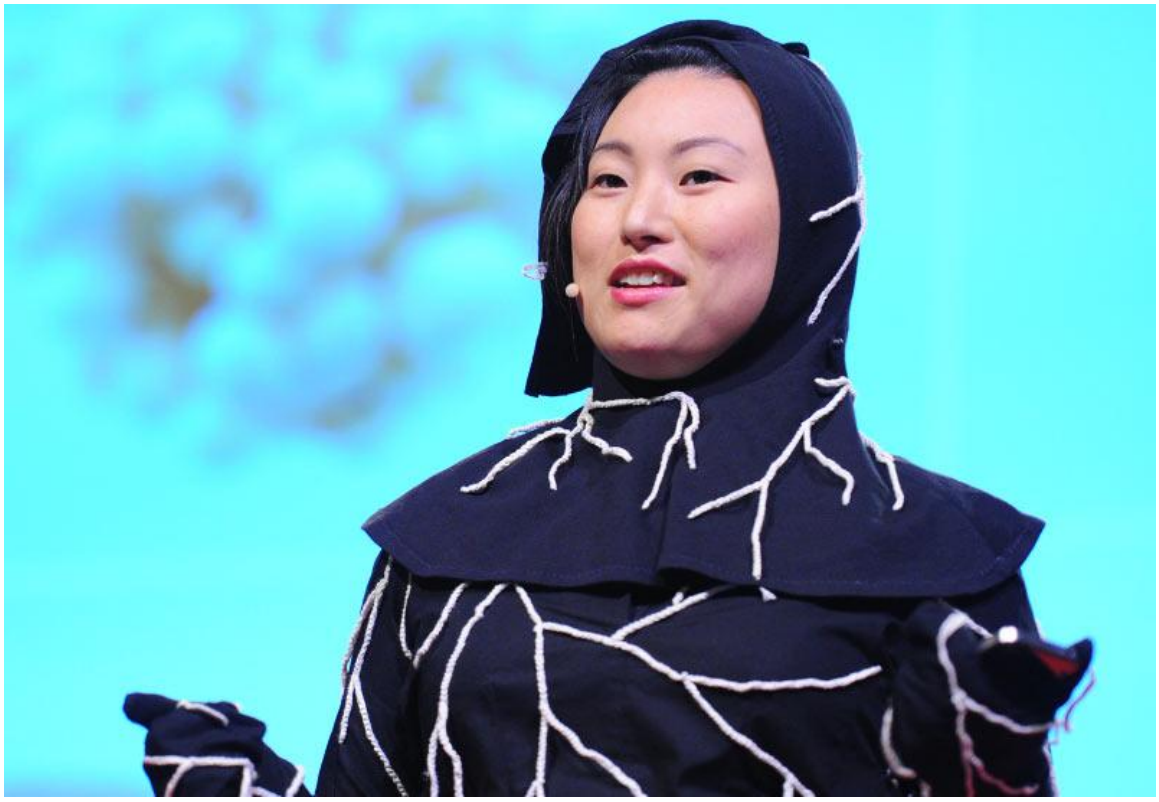

Figure 12 Jae Rhim Lee wearing the mushroom burial suit. Screenshot taken from the video of Lee's 2011 TED Talk.

nature, but we also need practical examples of what these relations might look like when they are enacted. Although images of decomposition may instill fear for the afterlife in some, confirming precisely the dangers of letting one's body comingle with others, they might also help viewers come to terms with, and even appreciate, decomposition and edibility. In other words, although the IBP's images of decomposition and consumption might initially confuse or even startle some viewers, they also have the capacity to initiate viewers into a way of thinking about their bodies and their relationships within broader ecosystems that further deteriorates the discursive boundaries between body/environment and eater/eaten.

Moreover, the IBP's visualization of human edibility invites viewers to imagine

the transitional state between life and death differently, to imagine the dead human body as a site of sustenance for others rather than a passive object. Instead of keeping the bounded body in tact or visualizing a body that "looks alive," these "Decomp Me" images explode normative boundaries among the human body and its environment, between humans and other species, between living and dying, between eating and being eaten. Just as Douglas (1966, 3) framed the impulse to get rid of dirt as a way of "positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea," so too is the IBP's embrace of visual disorder in the transitional state a way of creating new relations with dying, death, decomposition, and consumption. Contrary to some popular stories about humans being eaten by more-than-human others (Plumwood 1999b; Schutten 2008), these images dedramatize the (potential) pain of being consumed. Rather than being forcefully ripped apart and eaten, the body visualized by the "Decomp Me" application is slowly eaten away by simulated mushrooms. No sliced skin. No bulging organs. No broken bones. No blood. Figured as fodder for others, the human body is no longer merely the consumer of environments, but is also and consequentially implicated in relations of consumptive reciprocity. These images provide viewers with a chance to imagine what this process might look like without succumbing to the theatrics of gore. Human edibility, these images assert, need not be the worrisome act of bodily destruction it is made out to be in narratives of cannibalism or stories of humans being eaten alive by charismatic megafauna in the wild. Becoming edible might be imagined instead as the intimate embrace of one body by others, a slow, elegant form of de-composition.

In addition to the TED Talk and "Decomp Me" application, the idea and practice of consumptive reciprocity is most rigorously materialized in the form of the IBP's

mushroom burial suit itself (Figure 12), which serves as a physical alternative to modern burial and cremation practices. The mushroom burial suit is a means of further displacing the eater/eaten dualism that has undergirded western funeral practices, particularly conventional burial with its strong coffins and heavy vaults. Although conservation burial readily exposes the body to the decompositional force of the biotic communities in the soil, replete as it is with hungry microorganisms, that practice embraces decomposition more than consumption. Indeed, as noted at the outset of this chapter, the Ramsey Creek Preserve website ensures readers that animals very rarely disturb buried bodies. On the contrary, the IBP's mushroom death suit creates the conditions for the human body to become food for others. During her TED Talk, Lee explains:

> And now about these ninja pajamas. Once it's completed, I plan to integrate the Infinity Mushrooms into a number of objects. First, a burial suit infused with mushroom spores, the Mushroom Death Suit. I'm wearing the second prototype of this burial suit. It's covered with a crocheted netting that is embedded with mushroom spores. The dendritic pattern you see mimics the growth of mushroom mycelia, which are the equivalent of plant roots.

Mushroom mycelia are embedded in the suit itself, between layers of thin fabric, and lie in waiting to break down whatever nutritive material is placed inside the suit. The mycelia recognize human bodies as food and so decompose them, but they also consume other materials, such as the wood caskets some users might opt to be buried in. To don the mushroom burial suit is to wear a garment that will hasten human decomposition. Importantly, use of the mushroom burial suit requires forethought. Since the suits are custom-made and thus not available on the shelves of local funeral homes (wait time, according to the Coeio website, is between two to four weeks), potential users must work in advance of their own deaths to choose this option. In other words, those who might

want to give their bodies over as fodder in this way must think about their own deaths and mortal materiality and plan accordingly. Thus, the mushroom death suit not only materializes human edibility but forces a thoughtful engagement with the question of deathcare and with the possibility of becoming edible.

The documentary *Suiting Dennis*, produced by Grace Lee (2015) for the IBP and released at the end of 2015, follows the mushroom burial suit's first human adopter, Dennis White, and his family as they negotiate what it looks and feels like to prepare for an unconventional burial. *Suiting Dennis* begins in a homey kitchen as family members prepare a meal together but quickly cuts to a close-up of Dennis who explains that he was recently diagnosed with primary progressive aphasia (PPA), a neurological disease that gradually eliminates the capacity for language use, and that he is "going to die sooner rather than later." "I never thought about death until I was diagnosed," he says looking into the camera, "and then it suddenly became urgent. And I want to go out with a bang like I've lived most of my life." Having watched Lee's TED Talk, Dennis notes that he "was fascinated" by the prospect of being buried in the mushroom suit. Citing Neil deGrasse Tyson's request that his body be "buried, not cremated, so that the energy content contained within it gets returned to the earth, so that flora and fauna can dine upon it, just as I have dined upon flora and fauna during my lifetimes" (thiscantbeitagain 2010), Dennis offered his body up as a test case for the IBP's mushroom burial suit. He thus gave his body over to the Project, and back to the land-community, in an unprecedented way—"with a bang," so to speak.

The opening scenes of *Suiting Dennis* articulate consumption and death in subtle but important ways that interface with the mushroom burial suit and ecological deathcare

more generally. As noted above, viewers initially encounter family members collaboratively cooking a meal in the family kitchen. The documentary cuts several times to close-up shots of prepared food in glass dishes and cast-iron frying pans, vegetables and sausages waiting to be eaten by the members of the family who have gathered together to break bread. As meal prep comes to an end, the group sits around a table, taking bites of the feast that has been prepared. Kids, not yet required to partake of the whole meal, dine on noodles with butter. As this scene of familial consumption unfolds, we hear Dennis's monologue. As noted earlier, PPA causes the afflicted to gradually lose control of their voice, making speech a difficult and eventually impossible bodily feat. By the time the documentary was shot, Dennis had already begun to lose some of his verbal function and, thus, his voice breaks in and out as he speaks. In some cases, there are long gaps between words as Dennis struggles to speak forth his desire to desire to decompose in the mushroom burial suit. We hear in his voice the deterioration of the human body, the often gradual and sometimes rapid withering away of corporeal functions. Just as his voice breaks, so too does the body break. It breaks down, becomes otherwise. In these opening scenes, then, dying is likened to consumption in a broad sense. Dying begins to appear both like the food on the table (edible in the usual sense) and like Dennis's voice (deterioration of the subject, the "I," materialized in the sonic form of speech).

The majority of the 27-minute documentary *Suiting Dennis* oscillates between personal vignettes that paint a picture of Dennis's life and segments showing his family making preparations for his funeral. When, towards the end of the film, Lee delivers Dennis's custom-made mushroom burial suit, the family cheers with excitement. Noticing that the final version of the suit looks different from the one that Lee wore in

her TED Talk, Dennis's daughter asks where the mushrooms are. The suit prepared for Dennis is beige, not black, and the squiggly white lines that represented mushroom spores in the first several prototypes are gone. Lee explains that in Dennis's suit the mycelia are embedded between the layers of fabric; they will appear only once his dead body is interred and begins decomposing. His daughter's question indicates an unspoken but implied concern with edibility: Are the mushrooms really there? Is this thing going to work? Is the suit going to eat Dennis like you said it would? This brief encounter with the potential of edibility, though, is quickly eclipsed by the more mundane details of funeral planning, such as the costs of burial plots and how different family members will take part in the deathcare process. Thus, while Dennis explicitly describes his decision to be buried in the mushroom burial suit as an attempt to make his body available as food for others, especially when he cites deGrasse Tyson's now-famous expression of edibility, the documentary devotes more time to the interpersonal narratives that shape end-of-life care. In a sense, this lines up with Coeio's shift from the more provocative invocations of human consumption offered in Lee's initial TED Talk to the broader notion of "assembling" that now predominates within its discourse. While I am sympathetic with the notion of gathering embedded within the new company name, it is disappointing to see the more radical sense of edibility fall away as sentimentalism, however well intended and powerful, takes its place. Like the documentary, Coeio devotes less energy to convincing people to embrace their comestible corpses than it does working to reconceive deathcare and death acceptance more generally by creating contexts where family and friends can come together around death in new ways.

Whereas *Suiting Dennis* largely relegates human edibility to the background,

popular reception of the project feasts on the issue of consumption. Following such reception is a way of tracing the initial force with which the IBP is moving in the world and, indeed, there is some evidence suggesting that humans besides Lee and White are willing to give up their magisterial, if not mythic, position at the top of the food chain by donning the mushroom burial suit when they die. Or, at least, to consider the shroud as a viable deathcare option. Since Lee's initial TED Talk was released in 2011, the IBP has garnered widespread attention, much of it positive. For instance, Steven Colbert included the mushroom burial suit in an episode of his show, *The Colbert Report* ("Tip/Wag: Toys 'R' Us, Shroom Tombs, and John Pike" 2013). Colbert sardonically tells the audience, "When I die ... I [hope I] can spend an eternity doing what I love most, taking up more space than I need. That's why I'm so offended by this next product." A little later on, Colbert playfully balks at the environmental justification for what he calls the "shroom tomb," questioning, "Who are these monsters trying to turn my death into some kind of natural process?" The mushroom burial suit has also been featured on episodes of the CBS show *The Doctors*, Comedy Central's *Tosh.0,* and several NPR shows. The artist Björk even curated a playlist of her favorite TED Talks, including Lee's "My Mushroom Burial Suit" as her top pick (Björk 2017). Art exhibitions have been organized around the mushroom suit ("Natural Causes" 2017) and, in September 2016, models donned the shroud on the Vogue runway during New York Fashion Week (Regensdorf 2016). These are just a few examples of how the Infinity Burial Project is moving ecological deathcare practices away from the margins and toward the center.

Online audiences have also indicated interest in the mushroom burial suit. More than 750 comments have been added to Lee's initial TED Talk, which is published on

both the TED website and on YouTube. One commenter asked, “Who wouldn’t want to become compost that could nourish a beautiful flower garden?” while another reported that, “To think that my body will break down into the soil and feed life or even push up a tree or daisies is a greater feeling than that of being entombed like some pharaoh who could not let go.” By framing their bodies as food for various kinds of flora, these commenters acknowledge and avow the edibility of their own bodies. Indeed, in these comments, decomposing bodies are figured as precursors to the development of new life. Human bodies can “nourish” and “feed life,” which are both thinly veiled euphemisms for edibility. Another commenter implores: “Stop wasting. Start feeding back.” The injunction to make one’s body useful in death aligns with the IBP’s efforts to reduce the burden that toxic bodies have on the planet. Here, “feeding back” is situated as a means of giving back to the land-community that nourished one’s own body during life. In a way, this commenter’s call mirrors those calls for recycling. Rather than waste the energy content in one’s body, they suggest, we should cycle it back into biotic communities where it can be put to use by others. Yet another commenter notes that, “I hope I will be allowed to decompose in the most nourishing, least toxic way possible!” Expressed in the form of a wish, this remark resonates with many of the hundreds of other comments that have been posted by audience members to Lee’s TED Talk. Drawing from Lee’s characterization of human bodies as storehouses of toxins and of modern funeral practices as toxic, many commenters make a distinction between polluting and nourishing the earth. Throughout these comments, the idea of nourishment appears again and again as a way of signaling human edibility without invoking the concept in the more graphic terms laid out in Lee’s TED Talk.

As expected, others express doubts, concerns, and even feelings of fear in response to the IBP's proposal to transform human bodies into food for mushrooms. Many of the more skeptical responses to the IBP revolve around one of two concerns: on the one hand, some audience members worry that Lee's mushrooms will not be able to distinguish between living and dead human bodies and, on the other hand, some people express an aversion to Lee's criticisms of human activity. For example, one commenter remarked that, "It's as if we are developing man eating creatures and hoping that we will always be able to keep them under control! Seriously! This is scary!" Here, human edibility is framed as a dangerous opening onto massive consumption that could easily spiral out of control. This commenter's slippery slope argument rightly questions whether humans can ultimately manage their mushroom companions, but mobilizes this concern not to move the IBP's aims forward but, rather, to close down productive conversation by calling into question its basic assumption: that mushrooms can be marshaled as allies in human efforts to improve ecological conditions. Another commenter asked, "Why not donate your body to medical science? Why is the assumption that everything we do is 'bad' and that we cannot even die in dignity, but have to be 'recycled'—sheer idiocy." Against the IBP's contention that industrial culture generally, and modern funeral practices in particular, do harm to the more-than-human world, this commenter questions the underlying assumption embedded within Lee's TED Talk, namely that humans are always in some sense at odds with broader ecosystems. Ironically, however, this commenter's fundamental disagreement hinges on the possibility that humans can act in ways that are beneficial. Their response, then, seems to take issue not so much with Lee's proposed alternative but with the way in which she puts forth this proposal. What these

two comments, and dozens similar to them, suggest is that when aversion to the IBP arises it is often depicted not as a distaste for the concept of human edibility *per se* but, on the contrary, with the modes by which human edibility might enter into and become a part of cultural practices.

Ecological Bodies

The IBP's call to conceptualize human bodies as edible matter is a provocative incitement to think about the various forms of symbiosis in which *Homo sapiens* are always already engaged. "We are symbionts on a symbiotic planet, and if we care to, we can find symbiosis everywhere," writes the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis (1998, 5). "Physical contact is a nonnegotiable requisite for many kinds of life." Symbiosis, simply put, occurs when multiple species live alongside one another, and sometimes inside of one another, as joint beneficiaries of mutually sustaining relations. Contrary to individualizing conceptions of human being, a view towards symbiosis reveals the many ways in which humans are entangled in consequential relationships with other kinds of organisms, sometimes latching onto other species and sometimes serving as a host for inner worlds of multi-species flourishing. Drawing from Margulis's highly respected take on evolutionary symbiosis (basically, the idea that evolution occurs as a result of symbiotic relationships and the transformations they evoke), Haraway (2008) suggests that practices of eating and being eaten bring different species into close contact with one another in significant ways. Symbiosis itself, one might argue, is the basis and the condition for ecological life, if we think of ecological life as being bound up with concrete, lived experiences in relation. In this penultimate section, I unpack how the IBP

enrolls audiences in forms of ecological response-ability by posing certain forms of edibility as decisions to be made, choices to be risked.

Like ethics, ecological response-ability is related to questioning and pursuing what is best for partners in relationality. Unlike ethics in its more transcendent guises, however, ecological response-ability involves actors in the immanent and precarious game of making decisions. It raises the question, posed in Chapter One, about what it means to respond, rhetorically and otherwise, to the relationships one finds oneself inhabiting and animating, as well as the choice to enter into new relationships. For Derrida, the question of response was always vexing. Not only are there numerous ways of responding that produce different effects in the world, but every response implies the act of decision. Every decision, as Derrida (1995; 2004) contends, is a response to a more fundamental undecidability. If one must decide, that means there are no obvious answers. One thus always decides in the face of the undecidable. Hence, one chooses. One risks a response. One wagers or gambles, which is to say, one plays in making decisions. Rather than serving some transcendental or deontological or even utilitarian end, decisions are immanent responses, offered up by meager beings with limited understandings.

The IBP calls on audiences to make decisions in the face of unknowable ecological futures. During her TED Talk, for instance, Lee situates human edibility as a means of composing mortal assemblages built on the idea and practice of consumptive reciprocity. She says,

> I realize this is not the kind of relationship that we usually aspire to have with our food. We want to eat, not be eaten by, our food. But as I watch the mushrooms grow and digest my body, I imagine the Infinity Mushroom as a symbol of a new way of thinking about death and the relationship between my body and the environment. See for me, cultivating the Infinity Mushroom is more than just scientific

> experimentation or gardening or raising a pet, it's a step towards accepting the fact that someday I will die and decay. It's also a step towards taking responsibility for my own burden on the planet.

Here, Lee begins by situating human edibility as one possible form of relation among others. Though human bodies are insuperably exposed to the more-than-human world, including to microorganismic others who incessantly make meals out of our living bodies, Lee suggests that there are decisions to be made about whether and how one's body will be given over as fodder for others when one dies. Since we do not "usually aspire" to become food for our food, that is, we do "usually aspire" to inhabit and embody other relations. As Lee argues earlier in her TED Talk, the conventional forms of burial and cremation popular in the United States are good examples of the kinds of relationships we tend to aspire to. In the case of conventional burial, the relationship is one of sequestration: the human body is "usually" kept away from other organisms that might dine upon it. By acknowledging that the IBP's proposal stands out against this background, Lee recognizes as well that there are important distinctions to be made between those practices that deny and those that foster the energy contained within dead human bodies. What she advises is embracing an unusual aspiration, a desire to become otherwise and in ways that subvert typical human aspirations of mastery, control, and distinction from the more-than-human world.

In contrast with the model of sequestration that governs many modern burial practices in the west, the IBP explodes the assumption that one could or should separate one's body from the earth. Rather, Lee positions the mushroom burial suit as a "new way of thinking about death and the relationship between [her] body and the environment." Embracing symbiotic relationships, that is, promises to transform ways of thinking about

and acting towards and with other species within ecosystems. This "new way of thinking" proposed by the IBP forces humans to acknowledge the fact that their bodies are not their own, at least not exclusively. One's body is an opening onto the world, not an airtight enclosure that protects one from the world. In Derridean (1991) terms, the human body is an exercise in the productivity of limits: we become what we are because of encounters with what is outside of us, meaning that whatever we "are" is not in any simple way a feature of internal life. Lee's injunction to conceptualize the human body as edible in some ways echoes Derrida's (1982) claims about the "ends of man," especially to the extent that it mandates an acceptance of the "relationship between my body and the environment." The environment is not external to the human body but is, rather, a constitutive part of embodiment, as Martin Heidegger (1953) teaches us. Heidegger argues that being human is inextricably bound up with "*being-in-the-world*," which is to say always already being part of, not alongside or apart from, the very world in which we dwell (see also DeLuca 2005). Thus, the "new way" forged by the IBP leads the willing into strange forms of encounter, even consumptive encounter, with the more-than-human world in which human beings are inescapably situated (Abram 1996; Leopold 1949).

The IBP's call to more robustly dwell in the world in relations of consumptive reciprocity is grounded in Lee's framing of human edibility as an opening onto forms of ecological response-ability. When Lee describes the process of feeding bits and pieces of her body to the mushrooms, she invites audiences to join with her in imagining new ways of engendering symbiotic assembly with other species. She links the broader project of "accepting the fact that [she] will someday die and decay" with the material practice of watching "the mushrooms grow and digest [her] body." That is, witnessing is figured as

an incitement to rethink the world. Witnessing fragments of one's body being consumed by others better enables one to both cope with edibility as a constitutive element of human being but also imagine a world in which the human body is readily given over as fodder for others. Witnessing makes human edibility visible and thinkable. Thus, the IBP's initial rhetorical gesture—Lee's TED Talk—can be seen as an attempt to extend the range of witnesses to the practices and processes of human edibility by making available (verbal and visual) images of the body becoming food for others. In her TED Talk, Lee reiterates that coming to terms with the facts of death and decay hinges on being able to "witness" and to "imagine" the decompositional processes one's body will undergo after death—being able to see what these processes (might) look like is a way of realizing their inevitability, of making them real.

For the IBP, embracing human edibility is one potential means of making amends with the planet that humans have polluted. Rhetorically, humans are framed as the responsible party in a long line of environmental crises. The issue that environmentalists raise is whether and how humans will attempt to remediate their past actions and make the world a more, not less, habitable place for both current and future human beings and more-than-human cohabitants. Toward this end, Lee (2011) suggests that giving her body over as food for others is "a step towards taking responsibility for my own burden on the planet." Mobilizing the notions of burden and responsibility, the IBP suggests that humans owe something to the more-than-human world. If human bodies are a "burden on the planet," this is so because they are both resource-intensive and because they pollute the ecosystems within which they dwell. Humans take up space and, in doing so, make the world a different kind of place than it would be without them. The IBP is particularly

concerned about the toxic legacies of human action, and it is this "burden" that necessitates a form of response. As Lee puts it, "we are physical beings who are intimately connected to the environment." This intimate connection with the more-than-human world means, as noted earlier, that we cannot extract ourselves from the circuits of relationality that contingently constitute ecosystems. Taking seriously the fact that all humans are intricately entangled in, and exposed to others within, ecosystems provides the impetus for reconceptualizing the human body as edible. Thus, for the IBP, to be responsible in such a world is to make amends for one's burden by making the energy content stored in one's body available to others.

The concept of "responsibility" underwrites the IBP's calls for action. This concept implies that one can respond in better and worse ways to a set of circumstances and cohabitants that impinge upon one, that is, that one might respond well or badly to the forms of exposure to which one is exposed. I want to say that the IBP "invites" audiences to respond to their ecological embededness, their fundamental exposure, by making themselves edible through their deathcare choices. Derrida (1995, 14) wonders: "What is an invitation? What is it to respond to an invitation? [...] It should never [*devrait*] imply: you are obliged to come, you have to come, it is necessary. But the invitation must be pressing, not indifferent." This invitation extended by the IBP to think of oneself and to comport oneself as edible matter, to expose one's body to the possibility of consumptive reciprocity, impinges upon its recipients not only since it poses a question about postmortem practices but also, and perhaps more powerfully, because it challenges us to think of our bodies differently before death, to apprehend how we are always already comestible. There is, of course, the possibility, the good chance, that one will

receive without responding to this invitation, perform something of a nonresponse, and that this nonresponse exacts a kind of response in its own way. Too, one might respond obliquely to the IBP's call, that is, respond by challenging its claims, putting its position under pressure. One might also respond in the negative, say "no!" to this invitation to give oneself over, one's body over, to the more-than-human world in just this way, to refuse in a simple way to become food for others. Or one might respond, as the IBP hopes one will, affirmatively by embracing this concept of edibility and by deciding, rendering a verdict, to embrace not only one's finitude, one's exposure, but also one's edibility. Regardless of what decision is made, the IBP submits an invitation, extends an opportunity to respond to ecological enmeshment and so to grapple with the ways in which we are already intimately connected with our world.

In this sense, the IBP's efforts are grounded in an ecological understanding of relationality and response. Ecology teaches us that everything is interconnected, that no thing stands alone (including human beings), and that the actions of one actor can affect all the other actors in ways both minute and magnificent (Morton 2010). Lee makes this argument in her TED Talk: "once we understand that we're connected to the environment, we see that the survival of our species depends on the survival of the planet. I believe this is the beginning of true environmental responsibility." Here, the logic undergirding the IBP's invitation is more fully exposed. Three elements of this logic are worth noting. First, Lee positions "understanding" as the hinge upon which responsible forms of ecological relationality can be assembled. Understanding is not only rooted in intellectual activity, but also in embodied forms of connection with more-than-human others. Hence Lee's emphasis on witnessing the human body being consumed by others:

sensing the body in new ways, she suggests, can incite new ways of relating to others. Second, Lee argues that the vitality of the human species is bound up with the entire planet's well being. Thus, one's "understanding" must take account of more than the self, more than any individual human being's relationships within ecosystems. Rather, if we are intricately interconnected with the planet itself, we must understand our position within this broad meshwork and locate potential for transformations in the openings engendered by every form of relation. And, third, Lee frames this form of understanding as the "*beginning* of *true environmental responsibility*" (emphasis mine). Human edibility is not an end point but an initial gesture. As a "beginning," giving one's body over as fodder for others sets new relationships into motion, making new assemblages possible. Moreover, linked as it is with a "true" form of "environmental responsibility," this initial gesture of recognizing one's body as comestible is only part of a processual unfolding of relations to come. The truth of responsibility, then, is that it does not start and stop with single actions but is rather realized in a series of chain reactions that nevertheless depend upon a fundamentally different starting point. What the IBP makes possible is a point of departure that begins with the fact of human edibility and that therefore proceeds down different paths and into the midst of mortal assemblages composed of multiple species in relations of consumptive reciprocity.

Consumptive Reciprocity and Edible Assemblages

As the Infinity Burial Project reconceives and rematerializes deathcare practices in the form of the mushroom burial suit, it puts forth the conditions of possibility for new kinds of mortal assemblages. Throughout this chapter, I have been suggesting that

edibility is a key entry point for understanding the kind of assemblage this project makes possible. As a metaphor and a practice, consumption is all too often confined to its relationship with capitalism and, at least among some leftist academics, reduced to a "master's tools" strategy worthy mostly of negative critique. Yet, consumption is not simply an act within market relations, nor is every case of consumption necessarily something to be condemned. As Phaedra Pezzullo (2011) compellingly argues, sometimes ecological politics must engage consumption-based strategies in order to transform industrial and market practices. It is not always, and perhaps only rarely, possible to extricate oneself from relations of consumption within capitalist economic systems. Yet, the IBP offers an opportunity to more fully develop a sense of ecological politics that does not simply disavow consumption as a potentially productive scene of intervention. Indeed, by expanding our notion of consumption to those processes of eating and being eaten, the IBP opens onto a range of material, gustatory tactics for making a difference in the way that humans interact with the more-than-human world of which they are always already a part. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the IBP's rhetoric of carnality in some significant sense *digests* the largely Western notion of subjectivity and, as a byproduct of this process, produces a radically ecological assemblage based in practices of reciprocal consumption. The excremental remains of this process offer promising routes forward for ecological thinking and politics. The question, as Timothy Morton (2016, 162) puts it at the end of *Dark Ecology,* is "whether you are OK with widening your view, taking your eyes out of the telescopic light of Life, [...] and resting in the charnel ground."

The assemblage made possible by the IBP is one in which transformation is the

primary objective. Against narratives of personal identity, which posit an underlying essence in the form of an unwavering "I," the IBP puts forth a conception of the human as always in the midst of transformations. Digestion is one such mode of change. "Death is a moment of transformation; it's not an end. Returning to the earth and reuniting with the trees and the soil and the air is a source of potentially deep healing and hope," Lee (2016) contends during a second TED Talk. That is to say, death is not figured as the end of the subject per se but, rather, as an inaugural moment in a fundamental alteration: as the body decomposes and is consumed by others, it becomes otherwise. Since the mushroom burial suit makes it possible for mycelia to break down and consume the corpse, this digestive process quite literally materializes the deconstruction of the human. Decentered, the human body no longer occupies a magisterial role within the food web. It no longer can be seen as apart from the food web's messy, mortal weave. Displaced, the eater/eaten dichotomy withers away as the mycelia consume the human body and transform it into a useful and less-toxic part of the ecosystem and its web of consumptive practices. The challenge of the IBP lies less in demonstrating that human bodies are indeed edible (this point is uncontestable among reasonable people), but rather in demonstrating why and how humans ought to give their bodies over as fodder for others when they die. It is ultimately about extending an invitation to choose other mortal assemblages, to risk a decision to install oneself in an other postmortem gathering, a feast among commensal creatures large and small.

Moreover, the IBP is part of a larger mycological trend within certain ecological circles. Mushrooms have long been recognized as important allies within multiple contexts—from human health to ecological sustainability. "The bottom line," as the

mycologist Paul Stamets put is, "is that mushrooms generate soil. They are the grand molecular decomposers in nature and the grand recyclers of the dead, whether they are plants, animals, bacteria, or protozoa" (Stamets and Horrigan 2006, 154). In other words, mushrooms are essential elements within ecological networks: they literally help create the ground upon which terrestrial life itself can emerge and be sustained. Thus, the IBP invites *Homo sapiens* to join with our mycological counterparts in a collective effort to create more livable ecosystems. Human beings, along with all other living creatures, benefit from the compositional work of mycelia, but rarely give back to mushrooms in concerted ways. By creating practices in which human bodies can be made available to mushrooms as fodder, the IBP works to restore one of the key assemblages within any ecosystem: the assemblage of human beings and mushrooms, which can cooperate in productive ways to lessen the damages of industrialism, pollution, and the toxic practices reified by the modern funeral industry. With our mushroom allies, the IBP contends, we can stake out new forms of ecological relationality that bring us together with the more-than-human world to which we are always already exposed in edible compositions and with which we are ecologically entangled.[2]

[2] On September 22, 2016, Dennis White died at his home in Massachusetts (Lipovich 2016). Dennis was the first human to be buried in the mushroom burial suit. His body will nourish the earth and provide crucial support for the burgeoning ecological deathcare movement. The work of this chapter is dedicated to the White family, which embraced the Infinity Burial Project's efforts to imagine and to produce modes of ecological ongoingness even in the wake of profound loss of human life.

Works Cited

"About: Zero1 Biennial." 2012. *Zero1 Biennial*. http://2012.zero1biennial.org/content/2012-zero1-biennial.

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Bardini, Thierry. 2014. "Decompicultures: Decomposition of Culture and Cultures of Decomposition." *Green Letters* 18 (1): 1–13.

Barnett, Joshua Trey. 2016. "Politics of Edibility: Reconceptualizing Ecological Relationality." *Environmental Communication*, 1–14.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Björk. 2017. "6 Talks That Are Music to My Ears." *TED*. Accessed January 4. https://www.ted.com/playlists/57/bj%C3%B6rk_6_talks_that_are_music.

Bullard, Robert D., ed. 1993. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*. Boston: South End Press.

Burley, Mikel. 2016. "Eating Human Beings: Varieties of Cannibalism and the Heterogeneity of Human Life." *Philosophy*, 1–19.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

———. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

———. 2016. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Carson, Rachel. 1962. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Casey, Edward S. 1996. "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena." In *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, 13–52. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

———. 2001. "Body, Self, and Landscape: A Geophilosophical Inquiry into the Place-World." In *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, edited by Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, 403–25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2007. *The World at a Glance*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 2005. "Thinking with Heidegger: Rethinking Environmental Theory and Practice." *Ethics & the Environment* 10 (1): 67–87.

Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena*. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

———. 1991. "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, 96–119. New York: Routledge.

———. 1995. *On the Name*. Translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

———. 2002. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." Translated by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2): 369–418.

———. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, and Elizabeth Roudinesco. 2004. *For What Tomorrow ... A Dialogue*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.

"Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals." 2016. *The Humane Society of the United States*. Accessed October 4. http://www.humanesociety.org/news/resources/research/stats_slaughter_totals.html.

"Frequently Asked Questions." n.d. *Memorial Ecosystems*. http://memorialecosystems.com/FAQs/tabid/55/Default.aspx.

Gibbs, Lois Marie, and Murray Levine. 1982. *Love Canal: My Story*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gottlieb, Robert. 1994. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harker, Alexandra. 2012. "Landscapes of the Dead: An Argument for Conservation Burial." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25 (1): 150–59.

Harold, Christine L. 1999. “Tracking Heroine Chic: The Abject Body Reconfigures the Rational Argument.” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 36: 65–76.

Heidegger, Martin. 1953. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lederberg, Joshua, and Alexa T. McCray. 2001. “ ’Ome Sweet ’Omics--A Genealogical Treasury of Words.” *The Scientist*. April 2. http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/13313/title/-Ome-Sweet--Omics---A-Genealogical-Treasury-of-Words/.

Lee, Grace. 2015. *Suiting Dennis: A Family Story of Green Funeral*. Coeio. https://vimeo.com/145882693.

Lee, Jae Rhim. 2011. *My Mushroom Burial Suit*. TED. https://www.ted.com/talks/jae_rhim_lee.

———. 2016. *Accepting Death: One Family, One Burial Suit at a Time*. TED. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr2-Xyd6ViA.

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Lipovich, Joe. 2016. “Obituary: Dennis G. White, 64, of Woburn.” *Woburn Patch*. September 26. http://patch.com/massachusetts/woburn/obituary-dennis-g-white-64-woburn.

Margulis, Lynn. 1998. *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. New York: Basic Books.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.

———. 2004. *The World of Perception*. London: Routledge.

Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

“Natural Causes.” 2017. *Ace Hotel New York*. Accessed January 4. http://www.acehotel.com/newyork/natural-causes?utm_campaign=Natural+Causes&utm_medium=shortlink&utm_source=http%3A%2F%2Fthecreatorsproject.vice.com%2Fblog%2Fflesh-eating-mushroom-burial-suit-exclusive&utm_content=www.acehotel.com%2Fnaturalcauses.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. “On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense.” In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, 141–53. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Pezzullo, Phaedra C. 2011. “Contextualizing Boycotts and Buycotts: The Impure Politics of Consumer-Based Advocacy in an Age of Global Ecological Crises.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8 (2): 124–45.

———. 2014. “Contaminated Children: Debating the Banality, Precarity, and Futurity of Chemical Safety.” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 1 (2).

Plumwood, Val. 1999a. “Being Prey.” In *The New Earth Reader: The Best of Terra Nova*, edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus. 76-91. Boston: MIT Press.

———. 1999b. “Being Prey.” Kurungabaa. http://kurungabaa.net/2011/01/18/being-prey-by-val-plumwood/.

———. 2008. “Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death.” *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 5: 69–75.

Regensdorf, Laura. 2016. “Would You Wear a Mushroom-Powered Burial Suit? A *Vogue* Writer Takes the Plunge.” *Vogue*, September 10. http://www.vogue.com/13475097/infinity-burial-suit-mushrooms-green-design-jae-rhim-lee-coeio/.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1998. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Roy Harris. LaSalle, IL.: Open Court.

Schutten, Julie Kalil. 2008. “Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter.” *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 2 (2): 193–211.

Sontag, Susan. 1989. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Stamets, Paul, and Bonnie J. Horrigan. 2006. “Can Mushrooms Help Save the World?” *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 2 (2): 152–61.

“The Story of a Green Burial Company.” 2016. *Coeio*. http://coeio.com/coeio-story/.

thiscantbeitagain. 2010. *Neil deGrasse Tyson Stops a Religious Troll*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=101&v=afGkv0IT4dU.

“Tip/Wag: Toys ‘R’ Us, Shroom Tombs, and John Pike.” 2013. *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central. http://www.cc.com/video-clips/el55uc/the-colbert-report-tip-wag---toys--r--us--shroom-tombs---john-pike.

Yong, Ed. 2015. “Meet the Necrobiome: The Waves of Microbes That Will Eat Your Corpse.” *The Atlantic*, December 10. http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/12/meet-the-necrobiome-the-predictable-microbes-that-will-eat-your-dying-corpse/419676/.

CHAPTER SIX

NOTES TOWARD THE POSSIBILITY OF A POSTMORTEM POLITICS

Neither life nor death,
but the haunting of the one by the other.

— Jacques Derrida (2001, 41),
The Work of Mourning

The question of the self: 'who am I?' no longer in the sense of 'who am I' but 'who is this "I"' that can say 'who'? What is the 'I" and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the 'I' trembles in secret?

— Jacques Derrida (2008b, 93),
The Gift of Death

We can't spit out the disgusting real of ecological enmeshment. We have to make do with the nasty stuff handed to us on our plate.

— Timothy Morton (2010, 124),
The Ecological Thought

In the introductory chapter of *Mortal Assemblages*, I sketched a concept of the human composed of three interrelated motifs: first, that we humans are fundamentally and inescapably mortal beings, finite creatures that live and die; second, that in our finitude we are exposed to the more-than-human world, and that this exposure is the

condition of possibility for both our survival and our death; and, finally, that this incessant form of exposure is precisely what makes us response-able to the other creatures with whom we must coexist, that is, that our capacity for response, rhetorical or otherwise, is a product of our relationality. From these three conditions, I suggested that we think of humans as "mortal assemblages," finite gatherings of material-symbolic forces. Throughout the central chapters of this dissertation, I drew on these initial abstractions to think with three specific cases that display how distinctive modes of rhetorical response produce different forms of relationality, which in turn compose alternative mortal assemblages. Extrapolating from some of the rhetorical texts circulating in and around Ramsey Creek Preserve's sustained efforts at conservation burial, the Urban Death Project's endeavor to compost human bodies, and the Infinity Burial Project's creation of a mushroom burial shroud, I advised that we disperse, decompose, and digest classical conceptions of the human and embrace, on the contrary, an ecological understanding of the human that takes seriously the ways in which we are always already entangled in complex ecosystems. In doing so, I will soon argue, we might discover other ways of coexisting with the human and more-than-human others with whom we are inextricably interconnected and interdependent.

The titular concept of this dissertation, "mortal assemblages," is a crucial antidote to forms of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism which prevail in contemporary Western politics. For too long, our sense of political activity has been hemmed in by Aristotle's framework, which he laid out some two thousand years ago. Politics, in the Aristotelian sense, is a human practice with its interests lying in the foundation and sustenance of the *polis*. In his *Politics*, Aristotle (1984) makes clear that it is human

beings that have a political existence and interest. He writes:

> Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state. (*Pol.* I.1253a8-19, trans. Jowett)

Within the span of a mere eleven lines, Aristotle manages to (a) delimit political activity to human animals, (b) render this statement a fact of nature, (c) associate politics with speech, (d) ascribe speech to human beings alone, and (e) define the political by enthymematically linking speech with vitality. Thus, not only is politics, for Aristotle, a distinctly human activity, but it is also a decisively vital activity carried out by living, breathing, speaking human subjects. Despite its age, Aristotle's conceptualization of politics remains an apt description of how we think of political activity today, namely, as a set of human practices that impinge upon both human and more-than-human relations. Human political activity defines the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, and enforces these definitions so as to maintain order. Linked as it is with life, politics is carried out by the living for the living.

I hope that *Mortal Assemblages* will give readers several reasons to pause on this understanding of politics, to question Aristotle's fundamental assumption that politics is, strictly speaking, the work of living human beings. We need an ecocentric politics, one focused on modes of coexistence, some conditions of which I have already outlined in the preceding chapters. For starters, we have seen how the human is in no simple sense

"human." We are not autonomous, self-contained individuals but, rather, assemblages of all sorts of material, much of which is not-human (bacteria, fungi, fluids, et cetera). We become what we are only in relation with these others who compose us within specific ecosystems. Thus, when we speak of the human we are really referring to mortal assemblages, which means that politics has never, in a strict sense, been the purview of the human. We have also seen how human bodies enter into all sorts of strange assemblages, both throughout their lives and after their deaths, that impact upon their capacities to respond to the world. I have referred again and again to the assemblages composed by conventional burial and cremation as examples of how bodies are enrolled in assemblages that do damage to the more-than-human world. Similar to Russian nesting dolls, corpses are buried inside a complexly layered apparatus that prevents them from being reabsorbed by the ecosystem. And, with cremation, bodies are incinerated, leaving little of their energy for other actors. These two practices have remained hegemonic in the United States since the end of the American Civil War and animate not only corporate but also political practices. Moreover, we have seen how human corpses also generate counter-hegemonic politics. The three case studies explored in the preceding chapters are all examples of how corpses produce a politics of their own, a politics that relies not on the classic concept of the human but on an ecological notion of human bodies as mortal assemblages.

If we are to take seriously this concept of the human as mortal assemblages, as I have suggested we ought to do, we have no choice but to alter our notion of the political as well. Neither anthropocentrism nor human exceptionalism will suffice in the wake of this conceptual shift for the simple reason that we are no longer dealing with bounded,

autonomous individuals but with multiplicities that are both composed of heterogeneous materials and interested in more than human concerns. Ecocentrism offers another way forward. Whereas anthropocentrism centers the human and puts human needs first, ecocentrism focuses on the ecosystem as a whole and recognizes that there will always be multiple, sometimes competing, needs and demands. As Mark Smith (1998, 5) writes in *Ecologism*, "Ecocentrism places human beings in a different relationship to the natural environment" by maintaining that "human beings are part of a more complex system and no longer sit at the top of the ethical hierarchy." By decentering the *anthropos*, ecocentrism recognizes what has been true all along—that human beings are neither fully in control of the ecosystems they inhabit nor hold any ethical superiority over other creatures, indeed, that human beings are part of, not apart from, the world. Ecocentrism thus requires a different concept of political subjectivity. Channeling Heidegger, DeLuca (2005, 74) argues that, "Humanity is never a subject over and against or above the world apart from the world; rather, the subject is always in the world, a part of the world, and, indeed, is constituted by relations in the world." This worldly quality of the subject is inevitable; there is no way to transcend the fact that one is in-the-world, situated in relations with others, human and more-than-human alike, which impinge upon the very kind of being one can be. This is the point I have been making throughout this dissertation by grappling with several shifting deathcare practices that are rhetorically recomposing some of the assemblages that humans enter into. The activists and entrepreneurs that have enlivened these pages are already imagining an ecocentric politics.

Still, ecocentrism has a tendency to center life and ignore death, to focus on the

interests of living creatures without fully considering the political claims of the already dead and decomposing. Like an ecological version of Michel Foucault's (1990; 2008) concept of "biopolitics," ecocentrism can easily seem like a more holistic approach to managing life. Smith's (1998, 5) definition of ecocentrism, for instance, maintains a "focus on all living and life-supporting things and the interconnections between them." Although it is entirely possible, and in fact appropriate, to understand the dead as intimately interconnected with the living, unfortunately Smith and many others do not pursue this line of thinking. Perhaps a residual side effect of anthropocentric thinking is an affinity for life, the vital, and animate, and a distaste for death, the mortal, and inanimateness. We tend to skew towards life even when we embrace ecology. We forget that ecology encompasses decay and decomposition, too, as a necessary element of coexistence. For Timothy Morton (2010, 16), "The ecological thought is intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open [...] realistic, depressing, intimate, and alive and ironic all at the same time [...] black, earthy, and cold." Delving into the darkness of ecological politics means leaving behind feel-good environmentalisms that enable humans to see themselves once again as saviors of life and embracing instead the messiness of ecological enmeshment, which includes death, decay, and decomposition.

So, ecocentric politics needs at least two supplements if it is to account for and make sense of the sorts of postmortem practices that intimately connect the living and the dead within ecosystems: first, it needs a really capacious concept of political agency and, second, it needs a more nuanced understanding of mortal assemblages and the impact they (might) have on political thought and action. In these final pages, I suggest some supplementary paths forward for ecological politics in the wake of this work on mortal

assemblages while fully acknowledging that these notes are incomplete, perhaps incoherent at times, and certainly demand more sustained conceptual labor. Rather than formulaically outlining a new form of ecocentric politics, I offer some provocations that emerge out of ecocentric thinking while also pushing it further by forcing an encounter with death, decay, and decomposition. The postmortem politics I conceive of here is offered, then, not as a replacement for other modes of political activity and relation but as an opening for thinking more deeply about the ways in which the dead are always already impinging upon our modes of earthly coexistence. Or, as Jacques Derrida (2001, 41) puts it in *The Work of Mourning*, I am concerned with "Neither life nor death, but the haunting of the one by the other."

How the Dead Act

Ecocentrism needs a more capacious concept of political agency, one that can account not only for human activity but also more-than-human modes of acting in the world. Rhetorical theory in particular must find ways of moving beyond its human-centered approach to generate ways of recognizing agency in other places and from other sorts of sources.[1] Fortunately, a great number of thinkers have already called on us to

[1] Despite the postmodern, poststructural, and even posthuman turns, most work on rhetoric still assumes that human subjects are the source of material-symbolic activity, that "speaking subjects" and the "texts" they produce are the proper unit of analysis for rhetorical inquiry. In Karlyn Kohrs-Campbell's (2005, 3) estimation, to take just one recent example, "rhetorical agency refers to the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community." Whereas Campbell's definition starts out open and strong ("the capacity to act") it is quickly delimited to the apparently human ("competence to speak or write") practice of persuading proximate others ("in one's community"). While other scholars rarely theorize rhetorical agency in such explicit terms, arguably something like Campbell's view underwrites much historical and contemporary rhetorical scholarship.

recognize the ways in which more-than-human others act in consequential ways. For instance, David Abram (1996) demonstrates how the animate earth is always already communicating both with and without human interlocutors. Following Abram, Natasha Seegert (2014) asks that we consider "animate rhetoric" as the possibility that more-than-human creatures *might be* speaking to us. Similarly, Donal Carbaugh (1999) invites us to listen to the more-than-human landscape for signs of all sorts, including despair and joy. Jacques Derrida (2008a), too, enjoins us to recognize the ways in which non-human animals respond to us and invite our response as well. Pushing a step further, Donna Haraway (2008) contends that human and more-than-human make each other in an intimate dance of encounters within contact zones where communication takes place. Still more radically, Jane Bennett (2010) demonstrates how inanimate things like energy systems, twigs, and dead rats form significant gatherings that end up impacting upon micropolitics in real time. Each of these thinkers compellingly points to the possibility of expanding political agency beyond the merely human. Refusing to be hemmed in by anthropocentric modes of thought, they advance along more ecocentric routes to imagine a politics of the whole earth and its creatures, objects, networks, in short, all its assemblages.

As it has been deployed throughout this dissertation, the word *assemblage* comes from the collaborative work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), especially in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Throughout their collectively written tome, Deleuze and Guattari frequently invoke the assemblage as a way of describing how every singularity is already a multiplicity, a composition of heterogeneous material-symbolic forces that hold together for a while. As Manuel DeLanda (2016, 1) notes, however, "The word in

English fails to capture the meaning of the original *agencement*, a term that refers to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well." Thus, the word assemblage refers both to a process and a product, both a series of actions and the resulting conglomeration. Each of the case studies examined in *Mortal Assemblages* both pushes back against hegemonic assemblages produced by the practices of conventional burial and cremation (which I have sometimes referred to as the body-embalming-casket-vault-earth assemblage and the body-fire-emissions-ash-air assemblage, respectively) and also produces emergent assemblages of their own. In the case of the mushroom burial shroud, for example, we are dealing with a body-cloth-mycelia-earth assemblage that produces relations of consumptive reciprocity. Importantly, as DeLanda reminds us, "the parts matched together to form an ensemble are themselves treated as assemblages [...] so that at [all] times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages" (3). So, assemblages can be studied at multiple levels of complexity to understand the composition of earthly gatherings.

Whatever else this notion of assemblages does for social theory, one of its most significant consequences is its ability to decenter human beings as the source of political activity. Yes, human bodies are themselves assemblages, and, yes, human bodies enter into and transform other assemblages. No assemblage, however, is entirely human. Human assemblages are much more complex than we tend to suggest in everyday parlance about humanity. Every assemblage includes some elements that exceed the human, and which therefore make it impossible to naively ascribe any act to a singular, intentional human being (however politically expedient such acts might be). Throughout

his *oeuvre*, Bruno Latour (1987; 1993; 1996; 2007) has developed an approach and a terminology for studying both the process of how components (actors) are matched together and the resulting assemblages (network). He calls this approach "actor-network theory." His term for the component parts is actors, within which he subsumes human agency. Latour's approach "does not limit itself to human individual actors, but extends the word actor—or actant—to *non-human*, *non-individual* entities" (1996, 369). Thus, humans are actors but they are also made up of other actors. And, moreover, trees, cats, wine bottles, iPhones, soil, water cycles, climate patterns, and so on, are also actors. Latour's is a flat ontology: everything that acts and can be acted upon is an actor. If it makes a difference, it is an actor. Thus, there is no need to think that only humans are endowed with such capacities. Actants are all sorts of things that have force in the world or, in other words, actants are components that do things.

Importantly, neither actants nor assemblages need to be "alive" in the usual sense in order to act in/on the world. Plenty of nonliving things exert force. This book, that coffee mug, a jacket, some Post-It notes, a dead squirrel in the middle of a two-lane road: none are "living" but all do things. The book archives. The mug holds. The jacket covers. The sticky notes recall. The decomposing squirrel invites knee-jerk swerving. And these are just some of their forces. More radically, though, dead things do work that usually passes out of sight, out of mind. We do not usually think of dead, inanimate things as actors. As Bennett (2010, ix) avers,

> the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does do by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating in and around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our

> attentiveness, or even 'respect.'
>
> By categorizing some things as dead and therefore inert, or politically passive, we not only bolster human hubris but we also fetishize life. In letting ourselves believe that what is dead (no longer) impacts upon the world, or no longer has an interest in the world, we radically distinguish ourselves as living creatures from the rest of the world. We affirm the limited notion of politics as an enterprise carried out by living, breathing, speaking human beings, and forget that those classical political actors are themselves always already composed in relations with not only the more-than-human world but also with postmortem actors. Bennett does not go so far as to question how decomposing corpses might act, but her new materialism does help elucidate how they might "be potentially forceful agents" (x). It is possible, as I hope to have demonstrated in *Mortal Assemblages*, that dead bodies also have, as Bennett puts it, "the curious ability of [other] inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6).

What I am suggesting here is that dead bodies—whether they are decomposing underfoot in a conservation burial ground, decaying alongside other bodies inside a human composting system, or being digested by mushrooms—do things in the world. These bodies act in important and consequential ways. All too often, however, we assume that dead bodies just lie there, passive and inert, until we do something with them, that it is up to us to move the dead around. But, in fact, the dead move us in a variety of ways. Corpses are no doubt actants in the Latourian sense. They do cultural work, as Thomas Laqueur (2015) demonstrates. Indeed, we can ask the same questions of corpses as we ask of living, breathing, speaking human beings (or of any *thing* for that matter): "Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial

that allows someone to detect this difference?" (Latour 2007, 71). A quick survey suggests that decomposing corpses do all sorts of things: they produce necrobiomes, biotic communities where other species gather to feast and reproduce upon rotting flesh; they transform into a rich soil material, which is necessary for the growth and sustenance of other flora and fauna, including other human beings; they might contaminate other actors in the surrounding ecosystem if they are themselves contaminated by, say, mercury; they generate jobs in the form of land stewards, undertakers, designers, architects, construction workers, docents, seamstresses, mushroom farmers, et cetera; they change the way we think about dead human bodies and the postmortem practices that are plied upon them; they draw attention from other actors, including the author of this text, who make other things from the materials they furnish; they give us the gift of thought. Future research would do well to survey these and other postmortem forces to account for the ways in which corpses act in and on the world of the living.

We can say that dead human bodies act because we are no longer dealing naively with intentional individuals pursuing premeditated ends (Derrida 1988). Rather, corpses lay bare what is always true (though normally suppressed) about human bodies, namely, that they are teeming with other-than-human things that capacitate them to act (or not) in particular ways. When the body's defenses no longer function to maintain a sense of integrity, when the immune system ceases to protect the part of the human that we call the "I," the subject, the corpse makes plain the ways in which those bodies have always already been other than themselves. "Each human," Bennett (2010, 12–13) writes, "is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter." As soon as someone dies, and sometimes even before, decomposition begins. A lively process,

decomposition usually extends over a period of several months, beginning with autolysis (self-digestion) in which enzymes already in the body break down cells. Then bacteria start eating the intestines and, eventually, more and more of the body. The soft tissues transform into gases, liquids, and salts. The body bulges, leaks, burps. When buried in carbon-rich materials, the process is aided by a coterie of other organisms. Some insects live out their entire life cycles inside dead human bodies. Eventually the body purges, opening up and attracting larger animals such as vultures. "Far from being 'dead,'" as one reporter puts it, "a rotting corpse is teeming with life" (Costandi 2015). In the wake of decomposition, the land-community experiences a deep biotic enrichment: the space where the body decomposes is particularly lively. Decomposing corpses are animated in and through their relations with other actors, other elements that gather round the postmortem body. And, as I have shown throughout *Mortal Assemblages*, different ways of treating these postmortem bodies produce different sorts of assemblages that generate effects exceeding any individual body.

Mortal Assemblages and Postmortem Politics

Dead bodies act—so what? So long as we define actor capaciously, is it not possible to claim that any and every thing acts? Why contend that there is a kind of postmortem politics at work? Is it not enough to say that classical political actors, living human beings who speak, act on the dead, that it is the living who perform politics with corpses? Do not corpses act only in the ways they are made to act by living human beings who, after all, not only make choices concerning the dead but who also carry out deathcare practices? Are not corpses the passive material of postmortem fantasies and

strange but persistent death rituals? Deathcare practices are really for and about survivors, right? And even if we admit that corpses are actors, that they exert force in the world, does it necessarily follow that they are *political* actors, that they have a stake in and an impact on political activity?

Out of a sense of curiosity provoked by my work in *Mortal Assemblages*, I want to provisionally answer this final question in the affirmative: yes, there is something like a postmortem politics, and, yes, it does follow that decomposing bodies are themselves doing political work! This means thinking of politics slightly outside the Aristotelian tradition, though. Just after the long quote from the *Politics* that I have reprinted above, Aristotle (1984) remarks that, "the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing" (*Pol.* I.1253a25, trans. Jowett). Thus, if we detach it from strictly human actors, it is not hard to see that even Aristotle understood politics as a means of responding to the forms of exposure that our finitude entails. Thus, politics will have to mean something like *modes of coexistence*, *ways of getting along together*, and *efforts for ecological ongoingness*. Politics, in other words, will have to mean more than human deliberation about what is right and wrong, good and evil, and will have to exceed the intentional negotiation and enforcement of such codes. Conceived of instead as modes of coexistence, politics is opened up to more-than-human, even postmortem, forces that might "have a say," to anthropomorphize a bit, in how we get along so as to ensure ecological ongoingness. If earthly coexistence is the stuff of politics, then surely the human and the more-than-human, the living and the dead, all play a part. Having now spent several years thinking with and about alternative, ecological deathcare practices, only three of which make sustained appearances throughout this dissertation, I have a stronger appreciation for the

political work of the dead.

My sense is that postmortem politics operate on three distinct but interrelated levels, each of which deserves further inquiry and creative attention. The first level is linked to status quo deathcare practices, to hegemonic mortal assemblages and to the industries that maintain them. This form of politics is consolidated in what we might call the modern funeral industry, which consists of the owners and operators of funeral homes, crematoria, cemeteries, and mausoleums, as well as all the auxiliary companies and professionals that play a part in interring the deceased in the areas of transportation, refrigeration, embalming, dressing, hairstyling, casket-making, vault-making, grave-digging and refilling, floral arrangements, memorial production, and so on. Of course, at stake in this politics of the status quo are not just the people who make the industry but also the products and services which have become, after 150 years of use, taken-for-granted in the United States. This politics of the modern funeral industry has the benefit both of inertia and feeling like tradition. Long-held traditions are hard to break with, not because they are the right thing to do in any simple sense, but because they are what people usually do. We forget that they are conventions that were invented (Nietzsche 1999). For instance, it is not legally required that any body be embalmed before burial, but funeral professionals rarely disclose this fact to consumers. Consumers also need not purchase caskets from the funeral homes burying their lost loved ones, but this fact, too, is often overlooked. As Jessica Mitford (2000) compellingly argues in *The American Way of Death*, the modern funeral industry is predicated on practices and products that delude consumers into believing that their lost loved ones can be protected from the elements, that their bodies can be preserved—for a price. That the modern funeral industry is

maintained as well by powerful lobbyists who work hard to enact legislation at multiple levels of government is evidence, too, that politics is central to death and that death is central to politics (cf. “About” 2016).

At a secondary level, more subterranean than the first though gradually becoming more visible, one finds an array of counter-hegemonic political activities that challenge and reimagine conventional deathcare practices, as well as rhetorically recompose mortal assemblages. Some of these activities, especially their rhetorical aspects, have been the focus of this dissertation. At this level, postmortem politics work to transgress the boundaries established by the modern funeral industry by recomposing what it means to be human as always already ecologically enmeshed. Entrepreneurs, activists, sympathetic journalists, and even Ph.D. candidates participate at this level by decentering the human, challenging its association with autonomy, individuality, and privilege, and by working to emplace the human within the complex ecosystems out of which it emerges and in which it lives and dies. Taking its cues largely from the natural process of decomposition, this second level of postmortem politics develops modes of coexistence that treat the dead human body not as apart from ecosystems but as integrally and inescapably part of them, subject like all other organic matter to the deteriorating force of the world. Rather than devising more elaborate means of delaying decomposition (caskets), masking the effects of bodily decay from survivors (embalming), or maintaining the look of lawn cemeteries (vaults), this counter-hegemonic deathcare politics refutes the goodness or necessity of each of these things, finding value instead in the longer, more primordial tradition of returning bodies simply to the earth from which they came. Without lapsing into naïve back-to-nature discourses, however, this political movement for alternative, ecological

deathcare practices envisions technologies, technical and intellectual innovation, legal regulations, and human rituals as essential ingredients for sustainable forms of ecological ongoingness.

This second level of postmortem politics, at least when compared to the relatively large modern funeral industry, operates on a small scale. Money is one key measure of the differences. According to some estimates, the funeral industry in the United States brings in more than $20 billion a year in revenue ("Economics of the Funeral Industry" 2016). This figure accounts not just for the revenue brought in by funeral homes and crematoria but the share of funeral-related income generated by auxiliary services as well. The Urban Death Project, by comparison, excitedly reported raising about $90,000 via crowd source fundraising initiatives online in 2016. The costs of various services also varies widely. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the median cost of an adult funeral service with a viewing was $7,181 in 2014, or $8,508 if the cost of the vault was included ("Trends and Statistics" 2015). The Infinity Burial Project's mushroom death shroud, by contrast, costs about as much as a traditional vault alone—$1,500. Thus, embedded within this movement for alternative deathcare is a form of class politics usually overlooked by even the proponents of more ecological burials practices. Cremation, long lauded for its lower costs and accessibility, furnishes an important precedent for thinking about the class politics of ecological deathcare: we need affordable options that offer the deceased and bereaving dignified means of responding to the exigencies posed by death.

Beyond the financial differences, another gauge of the scales on which the first and second levels of postmortem politics work is the rhetorical burden shared by each to

articulate its values, goals, and practices. Those working for alternative, ecological deathcare practices are engaging the Internet, social media, documentaries, TED Talks, and crowd-sourced funding as ways of recomposing mortal assemblages, whereas the modern funeral industry largely relies on more traditional routes for gaining consumers. In many cities and towns, there is only one apparent deathcare option—the local funeral home, which might also include a crematorium—which makes choosing simple, perhaps too simple. The grassroots quality of ecological deathcare practices appeals to some who are seeking an alternative approach to postmortem care for themselves or their family members, but also significantly limits the extent to which the general population is exposed to these ideas.

The third level of postmortem politics is hardest to discern but also, perhaps, the most conceptually interesting. It has to do with the political claims and demands made by postmortem assemblages, that is, by decomposing bodies themselves. This level is the least obvious because the work that happens here is enacted rather than spoken, silently performed rather than verbally articulated, offered up to all the senses rather than just hearing and seeing. We will have to attune ourselves to the modes of rhetorical activity engaged by postmortem assemblages if we are to make sense of the political acts they conduct and the lessons for coexistence that they offer.

In one sense, we can ascertain this third level of postmortem politics by considering the ways in which different mortal assemblages act in and on the world. Different assemblages do different things, which produce different forms of relationality and, thus, divergent modes of coexistence. Conventional burial, for example, works on a logic of sequestration: separating the human body from the more-than-human world

through the mediation of several techniques and technologies all designed to preserve the corpse and delay decomposition. Conservation burial, by contrast, works on a logic of incorporation: bringing the body into close contact with the land-community by refusing as many mediators as possible. The mortal assemblages produced by these two practices exert different kinds of force in the world. Conventional burial, for its part, calls forth all sorts of professionals who are trained to handle dead bodies and to enact various practices and sell numerous products to survivors. Its logic is therefore not only anthropocentric but also capitalistic: it expands as much as possible the number of economic resources necessary to carry itself out. Conservation burial, on the other hand, summons far fewer resources. Conservation burial grounds tend either to be small operations or small sectors of already established conventional burial grounds. Since bodies are buried unembalmed and in simple wooden caskets with no vaults, considerable economic and ecological resources that form the core of conventional burial are unnecessary with conservation burial. Its logic, then, remains capitalistic (though much more modestly) but tends toward ecocentrism since conservation burial supports land conservation efforts. Patrons of conservation burials not only invest in a final resting place for themselves or a loved one, but they also invest in the land-community itself. Thus, these two sets of practices form different assemblages that impact upon the world in distinctive ways. They each engender modes of earthly coexistence, but conservation burial centers ecosystem rather than human interests.

Mortal assemblages also enact forms of relationality that reveal important lessons for thinking about and practicing modes of coexistence. By paying attention to the ways that human and more-than-human actors cooperate as a result of different postmortem

practices, we can learn from them. The Infinity Burial Project, for instance, offers a glimpse of what reciprocity might look like in action. Beyond simply calling for human beings to engender relations of mutual exchange, the mushroom death shroud makes it possible to physically give back some of what one's body has acquired through its exposure to the ecosystems in which it is entangled. As a medium, the death shroud serves as an in-between for energy exchanges. In it, the human body is simultaneously enclosed and exposed, contained as a mortal assemblage and opened up to the digestive potential of mycelia. When compared to the heavy caskets and vaults deployed in conventional burials, the mushroom death shroud operates on an entirely different understanding of coexistence. For the Infinity Burial Project, mortal assemblages need not be preserved in their wholeness but, rather, ought to be given over and given back to the ecosystems upon which they have relied and drawn energy. Reciprocity rather than one-way consumption. Digestion rather than preservation. Relationality rather than isolation. Immanence rather than transcendence.

We can witness as well examples of what ecological ongoingness might mean and look like by surveying the ways in which mortal assemblages relate to death not as an endpoint but as an opening onto other forms of relationality. Ecological ongoingness is about deteriorating the border between life and death, of recognizing how life and death are necessarily and intricately intertwined within ecosystems. In this dissertation, ecological ongoingness is about grappling with the ways that mortal assemblages are deeply and consequentially life-giving gatherings. Perhaps the strongest example of this line of thinking emerges in the still-speculative work of the Urban Death Project, which imagines human bodies as a raw material for soil formation. If the Project carries out its

plans, the soil that results from composting multiple human bodies alongside one another will be distributed throughout urban areas for use in flower and vegetable gardens. Just as the mushroom death shroud mediates forms of consumptive reciprocity, this process of composting harnesses the energy contained in human corpses to regenerate vital soil that can nourish other plants and animals. Comingling as they decompose together, the human corpses that are composted will lose all sense of personal identity. After several months in the composting core, it will be impossible, except with DNA testing perhaps, to tell one body from another, one corpse from the next, as all transform into dirt. Thus, human composting suggests both the possibility of unhinging human worth from individual identity but also of developing radical modes of coexistence that generate conditions for ecological ongoingness.

Finitude, Exposure, and Response-Ability, Revisited

Two months into writing *Mortal Assemblages*, I found myself out of town for an academic job interview. Excited about the prospects of finally securing a faculty position after nine years of higher education, I spent weeks away from writing to prepare my materials and research the university and department that had extended an invitation for a campus visit. All the while, I was receiving daily dispatches from my home state of Georgia, where my 85-year-old grandmother's health was quickly deteriorating after a year of ups and downs, including stints at in-patient facilities where she received round-the-clock care. Things were not looking good, my dad told me, and I had a feeling that she would not survive much longer when I walked out of the airport terminal to greet my hosts. The night before my interview began, I recorded a video telling her how much I

loved and missed her. I thanked her for being the most hospitable person I have ever met, a real exemplar of unconditional love and acceptance. Shortly after giving my job talk, which focused on the Infinity Burial Project's efforts to recompose how we think of the human body in its inescapable ecological entanglement, I noticed that I had several missed calls, text messages, and voice mails from family members. When, after a long day of interviews and all they entail, I returned to my hotel, I poured a glass of wine and called my mom. I knew the sort of news I was about to receive. Granna, as she was lovingly known not just by family members but her entire community, perished in her longtime home, in bed, surrounded by family members who had been by her side for weeks. Two days later I delivered the eulogy to a packed audience at her funeral, shortly after which her body was buried in a little cemetery on a hill near the Methodist church she had attended since she was a little girl.

My grandmother's death and deathcare left me deeply vexed. On the one hand, there I was writing a dissertation about the value of embracing finitude and exposure, and of pursuing alternative, ecological deathcare practices. Calling on scholars, practitioners, and anyone else who would listen to or read my work to reconsider our cultural aversion to imagining the human body as ecologically enmeshed, all my work as a researcher led me to be deeply suspicious of the modern funeral industry. On the other hand, there I was facing my grandmother's dead body. Everything about her funeral was conventional. Soon after she perished, undertakers from a local funeral home retrieved her body from her home, which they then embalmed, dressed, and styled for the visitation service they hosted in a large room of their funeral parlor. Her sons and their wives chose a beautiful wooden casket, purchased a concrete vault, deliberated transportation options, ordered

floral arrangements, got on with the business of having her headstone (which already included her deceased husband's information) carved, and generally went through the practices of dealing with the loss of a loved one. In that prolonged period of grief, knowing that the details were mostly being managed by a professional cadre of workers and that all I needed to do was show up, offered some comfort and certainly freed my mind to do other things, like visit with family members and friends, write the eulogy, do a Skype interview with another university, help my sister put together a slide show for the visitation service, and so on. Yet, my comfort was tempered by a feeling that perhaps this was not a time for such ease, not a time when I ought to feel so distanced from the fact of finitude that I faced so personally.

When thinking and writing about an issue like death, which affects us all in one way or another, one's intellectual and personal lives are destined to collide. The death of my grandmother generated just such an encounter. Simultaneously compelled by her wishes for a certain kind of funeral, the very kind that I write against in the pages of *Mortal Assemblages*, and a sense of commitment to the concepts and practices detailed throughout this dissertation, I confronted something of an aporia. How is one to respect, on the one hand, the choices made by others in difficult times and, on the other hand, remain responsive to the ecosystems one inhabits? I am not the only one who dwells near this impasse, as the case studies explored in this dissertation attest. We are living through a moment of profound disruption in the United States: how we think of our bodies, and of our entanglement within complex ecosystems, is shifting to meet with the ecological complexities we are learning to appreciate again. Deathcare practices are, perhaps surprisingly for some, on the cutting edge of this rupture, exploding long held ideas about

what it means to be human, to live a good life, to have a good death. The efforts of the entrepreneurs and activists highlighted in the preceding pages are initiating significant public conversations about death and deathcare, contesting the hegemonic funeral industry, and composing mortal assemblages that promise other ecological futures, ones in which the human is no longer understood as somehow apart from the conditions of finitude, exposure, and response-ability that connect us all in shared webs of ecological ongoingness and that demand vigilant attention to the modes by which we nurture earthly coexistence.

Works Cited

"About." 2016. *Funeral Consumers Alliance*. https://www.funerals.org/about/.

Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Aristotle. 1984. "Politics." In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, 1986–2129. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. 2005. "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (1): 1–19.

Carbaugh, Donal. 1999. "'Just Listen': 'Listening' and Landscape Among the Blackfeet." *Western Journal of Communication* 63 (3): 250–70.

Costandi, Mo. 2015. "Life after Death: The Science of Human Decomposition." *The Guardian*, May 5. https://www.theguardian.com/science/neurophilosophy/2015/may/05/life-after-death.

DeLanda, Manuel. 2016. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

DeLuca, Kevin Michael. 2005. "Thinking with Heidegger: Rethinking Environmental Theory and Practice." *Ethics & the Environment* 10 (1): 67–87.

Derrida, Jacques. 1988. *Limited Inc*. Edited by Gerald Graff. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 2001. *The Work of Mourning*. Translated by Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2008a. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2008b. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

"Economics of the Funeral Industry." 2016. *PBS*. Accessed July 11. http://www.pbs.org/pov/homegoings/economics-of-the-funeral-industry/.

Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I*. Edited by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

———. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York, NY: Picador.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Laqueur, Thomas W. 2015. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 1996. "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications." *Soziale Welt* 47 (4): 369–81.

———. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mitford, Jessica. 2000. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Vintage.

Morton, Timothy. 2010. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense." In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, 141–53. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.

Seegert, Natasha. 2014. "Play of Sniffication: Coyotes Sing in the Margins." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47 (2): 158–78.

Smith, Mark J. 1998. *Ecologism: Towards Ecological Citizenship*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

"Trends and Statistics." 2015. *National Funeral Directors Association*. http://nfda.org/about-funeral-service-/trends-and-statistics.html#cremationburial.